

Master thesis : "Navigating Adversity and Uncertainty: A Qualitative Study on The Resilience Process Among Undocumented Migrant Women in Belgium"

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Master Thesis

**Navigating Adversity and Uncertainty:
A Qualitative Study on The Resilience Process Among
Undocumented Migrant Women in Belgium**

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Abstract

This thesis investigated the process of resilience among undocumented migrant women in Belgium, using multilevel analysis to identify key challenges and the main contributing factors to resilience at the individual and social level, as well as their aspirations and future goals. By shifting the focus from mere vulnerability to the dynamic interaction of challenges and developing resilience, this research aimed to provide a comprehensive understanding of the lived experiences of undocumented migrant women, placing them as active recipients of adversity. A qualitative methodological approach was employed, with data collected through participant observation and nine semi-structured interviews with undocumented migrant women living in the province of Liege. The findings revealed that undocumented migrant women interact and move within various levels of the socio-ecological environment, encountering elements that enhance resilience as well as barriers and challenges that can compromise their resilience. Structural and systemic barriers to regularization emerged as one of the main obstacles that further produced various forms of vulnerability, including economic vulnerabilities, precarious living conditions, limited access to health care, and forms of discrimination and prejudice. As for the contributing factors to resilience, at the individual level, faith and spirituality constituted one of the main attributes undocumented migrant women possess to face difficulties, along with various expressions of personal agency. At the social level, civil society organizations constitute the main contributing factor to resilience besides family and friends, and fellow undocumented migrant women. Finally, regularization stood out as a key aspiration for most undocumented women.

Key words: resilience, undocumented migrants, women, vulnerability, adversity

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List of acronyms

CSOs: Civil Society Organizations

CGRS: Office of the Commissioner General for Refugees and Stateless persons

FRA: Fundamental Rights Agency

UMA: Urgent Medical Care

SES: Socio-Ecological System

FEDASIL: The Federal Agency for The Reception of Asylum Seekers

PECS: Political, Economic, Cultural, and Social environmental factors

1. Introduction

Undocumented migration is not a phenomenon to be viewed as a kind of social pathology but rather a structured feature of post-industrial societies and the dynamics of global inequality (Triandafyllidou & Bartolini, 2020). In other words, there is a systemic nature to undocumented migration, where economic and social structures in both sending and receiving countries create and sustain conditions for irregular migration. The drivers of irregular migration are situated at the intersection of people's quest for better jobs and life opportunities, from the insecurity in their home country to labor market demand and supply dynamics in countries of destination, the lack of viable refugee pathways, and extremely restrictive migration policies (Triandafyllidou, 2023).

From this perspective, it is often not a choice to enter a country without legal authorization and remain there or to enter legally and overstay the duration of a resident permit. It is a result of specific circumstances. Wherever there are routes to irregularity, being without papers means navigating life without administrative existence. It involves understanding what is and is not possible, how risks are assessed, whom to trust, and which institutions and places are to be avoided (Bloch & al, 2014).

This precarious migration status can cast a large shadow of uncertainty over individuals' future and present by reducing opportunities, increasing social isolation, and limiting access to essential services such as healthcare. This often invisible burden can be carried for years. Moreover, many undocumented migrants face common challenges, including threats of deportation, social disadvantage, racism, discrimination, exploitation, marginalization, and stigmatization (Koser, 2005). These challenges shape their everyday lives and impact their overall well-being as they develop serious health issues such as chronic stress, depression, and anxiety (Gonzales & al, 2013).

However, despite being exposed to various adversities, undocumented migrants happen to be extremely resilient (Gonzales et al., 2013). Studies conducted on undocumented migrant women from Latin America living in the United States showed that they exhibit higher levels of resilience in their capacity to adjust and adapt to the new environment, and overcoming harsh legal, cultural, and social barriers. They adapted by learning new skills like driving, engaging in adult education, building small businesses, and securing employment through the development of informal networks. They also exhibited a strong desire for independence, refusing to rely on social assistance (Campbell, 2008). Additionally, undocumented migrant women used cognitive reframing, behavioral adaptability, sociability, courage, and cultural pride as strategies for resilience (Garcini & al, 2022). These strategies not only helped them to survive, but they thrived and were able to improve their daily lives (Garcini & al, 2022).

This focus on resilience emerged in the social sciences literature as a counter-narrative to discourses of risk, vulnerability, and social suffering that see individuals and whole communities as victims. Rather than focusing on vulnerabilities or deficits, resilience-based approaches place strength, capacities,

resources, and transformative processes at the center of their concerns. In this context, Ungar (2008) considers resilience as the ability to adjust and surmount challenges through internal and external resources.

That being said, this thesis subscribes to this approach and adds to this evolving discourse by shifting the focus from mere vulnerability to the dynamic interaction of challenges and the building process of resilience among undocumented migrant women within the Belgian context. In doing so, this thesis seeks to provide a more comprehensive understanding of the lived experiences of undocumented migrant women and place them as active recipients of adversity. To achieve this objective, the following research question has been developed:

How do undocumented migrant women develop resilience to navigate the challenges they face because of their legal status in Belgium?

As initial steps towards answering the main research question, the thesis is guided by four sub-questions:

- What are the specific vulnerabilities and challenges encountered by undocumented migrant women?
- What are the contributing factors to resilience at the individual level?
- What are the contributing factors to resilience at the social level?
- How do undocumented migrant women envision their future, and what goals do they hold?

This thesis is structured as follows: the 2nd chapter presents the theoretical framework, which is divided into three main parts: defining and understanding undocumented migration, examining the lives of undocumented female migrants through the lens of intersectionality, and analyzing resilience as a multi-dimensional construct. This framework was developed based on a thorough review of the literature and insights from fieldwork, which highlighted the need to address specific areas within the existing research. The third chapter explains the research design, data collection methods, and strategies for ensuring the issue of trustworthiness, as well as some reflections on data collection and the limitations of the study. Chapter 4 is divided into four parts to present the results of the study. The first three parts are developed around the main themes that emerged from the data, while the fourth part provides a socioecological analysis of the findings. The thesis ends with Chapter 5 which discusses the results, their implications, and significance, as well as suggesting avenues for future studies.

2. Theoretical framework

2.1 Defining and understanding undocumented migration

2.1.1 Introduction and overview of the chapter

Language plays a crucial role in shaping people's perceptions and behaviors, impacting how they understand the world and interact with one another. This is particularly relevant in the context of migration. The words we choose to discuss the phenomenon of migration and the people it impacts can have a direct effect on how migration policies are constructed and implemented. Using proper terminology can contribute to creating a more comprehensive, sustainable, and human approach. Thus, defining irregular migration and identifying which individuals fall within this category can be challenging. The first part of this section will address this issue. Then, I will present how individuals' migration status goes beyond regular and irregular categories. Following this, it is necessary to understand the reasons behind the emergence of irregular migration, or as it is referred to "the production of irregular migration". Therefore, the final part of this section will explore the key factors contributing to the presence of undocumented migrants in receiving countries while providing insights into the Belgian context.

2.1.2 Defining undocumented migrants: Challenges over the choice of proper terminology

It can be difficult to find consensus on the most appropriate term to describe migrants in irregular legal situations. One key issue with terminology is the use of terms such as "illegal migrants" and "illegal aliens" or "*clandestine*". This language carries negative connotations and links non-regular status with border policies and national security protection (Jauhiainen & Tedeschi, 2021). It reinforces the stigma and stereotypes that portray irregular migrants as criminals, welfare abusers, or sources of unfair job competition (Coutin 2005; Paspalanova 2006; Broeders & Engbersen 2007). People may find themselves in a state of irregularity or illegality in relation to the regulations of the country they are trying to enter, reside in, or work in (Bommes & Sciortino, 2011).

Nonetheless, it is important to differentiate between a person's legal status and actions that may break a state's rules. A person's identity should not be solely defined by their legal status or behavior. Many scholars criticize the use of "illegal" to describe migrants, arguing that it is incorrect to label a person as illegal; only their stay or employment can be illegal (Schinkel 2009; Düvell, & al 2010). Moreover, International institutions have also rejected the use of "illegal migrants". The European Commission through its former Commissioner for Home Affairs Cecilia Malmström, stated in 2010: "*Let me be clear*

*about my vocabulary too: illegal migrants do not exist. People may come to the EU and might be required to use irregular ways...but no human being is illegal.”*¹

Therefore, today’s consensus holds that labeling anyone as illegal is disrespectful to human dignity (Triandafyllidou 2010; Ambrosini 2013). Many scholars and civil society actors have sought alternative terminology. Terms such as “undocumented migrants” or “irregular migrants” are used to avoid discriminatory connotations. They also aim to avoid the criminalization of migrants (Düvell 2006). Individuals who lack proper documentation or legal status to reside in country are referred to as “undocumented migrants”. This term emphasizes the lack of appropriate paperwork. It does not attribute any criminal intent to individuals. Irregular migrants are individuals who either enter a country without authorization, overstay their period of legal residence, or engage in work that they are not allowed to do based on their legal status. Moreover, "Irregular" undermines the oversimplified legal/illegal binaries, and draws attention to the complex nature of migration. It recognizes the fluidity of migrants' experiences and acknowledges the evolving nature of their status over time (Triandafyllidou & Bartolini 2020). In this sense, understanding the rich nuances and complexities of the phenomenon of “irregular migration” involves examining three key aspects of a migrant’s status: entry, residence, and employment. Each aspect can be either regular or irregular, and various combinations are possible (Jauhainen & Tedeschi, 2021). Although the choice of "undocumented" and "irregular" migrants appears more suitable as they provide more neutral language and describe the legal status of individuals without implying criminality, there is criticism surrounding the use of the two terms. Some scholars state that the term "undocumented migrants" can be ambiguous (Van Meeteren 2014). It may imply that individuals do not have any form of documentation. In reality, migrants may possess some documents that are either invalid, no longer valid, or not valid for entry, stay, or work in a specific country. Furthermore, some migrants may have initially crossed borders with legitimate papers but later found themselves without proper documentation. In many cases, migrants accumulate a significant amount of paperwork in their efforts to become legal residents (Chauvin & Garcés-Mascreñas 2012). On the other hand, the term “irregular migrants” has its limitations. It perpetuates also the binary categorization of migrants as either regular or irregular, much like other dichotomies such as legal versus illegal or documented versus undocumented (Van Meeteren, 2014).

Given the confusion and complexities surrounding terminology, it is important to specify the choice of the terms and what they mean in current research. "Undocumented migrants" and "irregular migration" will be used in this study. The former refers to individuals who remain in a country without official permission. These individuals are awaiting legal recognition, and are trying to obtain proper

¹ Malmström, C. (2010). Keynote address. International Organization for Migration. Retrieved from <https://www.iom.int/sites/g/files/tmzbd1486/files/jahia/webdav/shared/shared/mainsite/microsites/IDM/workshop/s/migration-and-social-change-2010/Keynote-Address-Cecilia-Malstrom.pdf>

documentation regardless of whether they entered the country legally or not. The latter describes the movement of individuals who have not been granted authorization to enter, stay, or work in a country. These definitions simply refer to the individual's administrative status without making a value judgment about their situation. While these definitions may seem straightforward, the complexity of the subject demands additional clarification.

Given this contest, and the various perspectives presented earlier regarding the terminology, it is clear that the "legal status" of migrants should be viewed as a spectrum rather than a dichotomy. Similarly, the phenomenon of "undocumented migration" should be understood as a fluid, non-static, and evolving process, and as Koser (2005: 7) explains: "*Migrants' status can change often rapidly. For example, a migrant can enter a country in an irregular fashion but then regularize his/her status. Conversely, a migrant can enter regularly then become irregular when beginning to work without a work permit or overstaying a visa.*"

Thus, in the following section, I will discuss possible migrant statuses that go beyond the binary logic of legal and illegal.

2.1.3 Navigating liminal spaces: Migrants' status beyond legal and illegal

The concept of semi-legality adopted by several authors is a multi-dimensional space that represents the complex and nuanced relationships between migrants and the legal system. It examines the various degrees of formality and informality in migrants' interactions with the state and the law.

Semi-legality captures migrants' experiences with partial legal recognition. For instance, migrants may reside legally in a country but work without proper authorization (Kubal, 2012). This state often results in the creation of semi-legal and semi-regular spaces where migrants exercise agency and citizenship in ways that challenge the binary logic of borders and migration policies (Papadopoulos & Tsianos 2008; Mainwaring, 2016). The agency of migrants includes how they behave and view the law, as well as their ability to navigate, negotiate, or even challenge the legal system (Kubal, 2012). Migrants might, for instance, look for ways to work without the required authorization, handle difficult visa or permit procedures, or advocate for their rights in the face of legal barriers.

Moreover, Menjívar (2006) uses the term liminal legality to describe the state of migrants who experience uncertainty and instability in their legal status, moving between different temporary categories and potentially facing irregularity at some point. Undocumented migrants often experience "liminal legality," a condition that combines characteristics of both legal and illegal statuses or as she referred to a "grey area between the legal categories". Moreover, Ambrosini (2023) describes this state as neither fully documented nor completely undocumented. In this liminal space, migrants may struggle to fully settle in the destination country or risk being sent to their home countries. They live in a

precarious state, always facing the possibility of deportation and enduring the challenges of limited social mobility (Gibney, 2008; De Genova, 2002; Moffette 2018).

In this legal ambiguity many migrants are forced to lead "invisible in-between lives" (Menjívar, 2006), building a society that is parallel to the official one. In navigating this uncertainty, migrants experience persistent instability and may need to assume different identities to survive (Papadopoulos & Tsianos 2008). Living in liminal spaces has its drawbacks, such as vulnerability, fear, and isolation, which are frequently made worse by limited access to employment, education, and healthcare.

Moreover, the complexity of migrants' legal status trajectories as explained by Goldring and Landolt (2013) complements the concept of "liminal legality" described by Menjívar (2006) and Ambrosini (2023). In both cases, migrants face uncertainty and instability in their legal status, often moving between different temporary legal categories (De Genova ,2002; De Genova 2004). Additionally, Goldring and Landolt (2013) suggest a model of "chutes and ladders" that helps explain the process of the creation of irregularity. The model emphasizes the legal status dynamics that result from the increase in temporary migration status and the decrease in opportunities for permanent residency and full citizenship.

Finally, the exploration of these uncertain legal spaces (semi-legality and liminal legality) is useful for the current study. It helps in understanding migrants' experiences and narratives in relation to the host country's legal system. In fact, semi-legality provides a lens through which to examine the link between normative expectations (i.e., what the legal system expects or assumes) and migrants' daily lived experiences, which frequently shift between legality and illegality. In this matter, Kubal (2013) drew his conceptualization of semi-legality from Michel Foucault and Michel de Certeau, who argued that the most insightful places to examine the law's power are not at the level of institutions and the state but rather at the level of lived experiences, where the power is utilized, understood, and sometimes resisted. In accordance with Foucault's conviction that power relations are most interesting to investigate at sites of resistance (Foucault, 1992), who argued that the most insightful places to examine the law's power are not at the level of institutions and the state but rather at the level of lived experiences, where the power is utilized, understood, and sometimes resisted. In accordance with Foucault's conviction that power relations are most interesting to investigate at sites of resistance (Foucault, 1992), semi-legality becomes a site of contesting the state's control over one's legal status. This contestation is illustrated through "*ways of operating*" which allow migrants to manipulate the mechanisms of discipline and conform to them only to evade them (de Certeau, 1984).

In other words, lived and expressed semi-legality emphasizes the creative strategies individuals use to navigate within the constraints of legal and social systems. It highlights how individuals, caught in the systems of discipline, employ resourceful and inventive methods to manage these structures (de Certeau, 1984) showcasing their resilience and adaptability in the face of legal obstacles.

2.1.4 The production of irregularity and liminal legality

As discussed earlier in this section, migrants often find themselves in situations of irregularity or liminal legal spaces not because they broke migration laws but rather because of broader systemic factors. These structural obstacles contribute to what is called the production of "irregularity".

The creation of irregularity is a process that has been extensively discussed by migration scholars, who assert that undocumented migration is not a natural condition but rather a socially and legally constructed phenomenon (Engbersen & Leun 2001; Düvell 2011; Gonzales et al. 2019). According to Castles & al (2012), four key factors contribute to the production of irregular migration: 1) state policies and regulations, 2) neoliberal globalization, 3) the agency of migrants, both individually and collectively, and 4) the role of the "migrant industry". For my research, the literature review will focus mainly on the systemic production of irregularity and liminal legality through policies and laws. I consider state policies and regulations as the primary source of "illegality" since a major part of my empirical work shows that the complicated bureaucratic procedures, the limited and sometimes the nonexistence of legal pathways to regularization, and the prolonged waiting periods often leave most of the migrants in a state of uncertainty and extended forms of irregularity.

Schweitzer (2017) suggests that irregularity is intentionally shaped by state policies rather than being the consequence of an individual migrant's neglecting or violating migration laws. De Genova (2002) also explains that "irregularity" is a construct created by migration laws when migrants are put into different categories that distinguish citizens and non-citizens and define "regular" versus "irregular". In his research, focusing on Mexican undocumented migrants in the United States, he argued that changes in migration policies have led to the emergence of legally vulnerable "illegal aliens", and the creation of new categories of "illegal" migrants.

Furthermore, the shift in legal status and the possibility of falling into irregularity, semi-legality, or liminal legality are frequently the result of changes in migration policies that emphasize temporary migration status while limiting pathways to permanent residency and full citizenship (Calavita, 2005), as previously stated. González Enríquez (2010) has termed the phenomenon "befallen irregularity". Migrants often find themselves undocumented due to complex administrative requirements concerning their right to stay or work, which can be difficult or impossible to satisfy. Renewals of residence permits for work also illustrate this issue. Regulations often demand stable employment to grant residence status to migrant workers, and the ones who cannot meet these criteria find themselves in an "irregular situation." This forced fall into "irregularity" implies an institutional production of the phenomenon. This institutional production of "irregularity" and "liminal legality" refers not only to migration authorities and police but also to officials in education, health, housing, and private employers who verify migration documents (Jauhiainen & Tedeschi, 2021). These checks may lead to the development of ad hoc control micro-practices at the local level. Moreover, migration control policies go beyond just

restricting irregular migration; they produce illegal residence status and irregular work (De Genova 2004, Vickstrom 2014) because they reduce legal avenues for labor migration, increase the requirements for family reunification, and make the regularization process difficult (Triandafyllidou & Bartolini, 2020).

Another interesting and broader perspective was advanced by Velluti Samantha (2023) who examined how contemporary legal systems define and shape the concept of personhood and how the different legal categories put in place by a state can impact the human rights and protection of migrants and asylum seekers. Her research showed that legal systems will treat all people equally and fairly before the law, regardless of their legal status, when a person's legal notion is equivalent to the larger meaning of a human being. However, when the legal definition of a person is primarily about being a "citizen-national", legal frameworks provide full personhood only within the legally constructed social and political order (Velluti, 2023). In other words, the state has the authority to decide to what extent and under what criteria individuals deserve full rights. This approach will produce specific categories where individuals will not have legal recognition and are therefore considered outsiders or aliens vis-à-vis the established system, such as undocumented migrants.

2.1.5 The production of irregular migration in the Belgian context

In Belgium, "irregular migration" is produced through various changes in legal and administrative measures. Historically, after World War II, Belgium witnessed an important arrival of migrant workers because of a labor market shortage. The migrants arrived from different countries initially from Southern Europe, North Africa, and Turkey, and were recruited as "guest workers". At that time, they were welcomed and could formalize their status after taking the job position (Martiniello & Rea, 2003). However, when the economic conditions got better in the 1970s and there was no need for additional workers, Belgium began to adopt more restrictive migration policies. These policies aimed to limit migration flows and control existing migrant populations (Martiniello, 2003). As a result, spontaneous labor migration, once seen as a valuable contributor, became problematic (Entzinger 2003; Martiniello & Rea, 2003).

In recent years, this shift towards stricter migration policies has been more effective. In some situations, unlimited residence permits are often substituted by limited permits (Sarolea, 2021). For example, with the reform of family reunification in 2011 and 2014 unlimited permits are now only available after five years, whereas it was formerly six to twelve months (Sarolea, 2021). Family reunification requirements were made stricter in 2011 by raising the minimum income and housing conditions of the sponsor, extending the required duration of a relationship to be considered eligible for family reunification, and restricting eligibility to children and partners (Flamand, 2021; Petrovic, 2012). These measures, in effect, can create irregularities by limiting the avenues available for migrants to regularize their status or reunite with family members.

In summary, this section explored the challenges surrounding the terminology used to define undocumented migrants. It emphasized the importance of choosing the appropriate terms and questioning existing categories that carry negative connotations, highlighting how these terms can directly impact the lives of migrants and influence societal perceptions. Moreover, migrants often navigate liminal spaces, and their state of irregularity is often shaped and produced by bureaucratic procedures and migration policies.

2.2 Applying intersectionality to the study of the lives of undocumented migrant women

2.2.1 Defining Intersectionality

In my thesis, I attempt to understand the building process of resilience among undocumented migrant women. In doing so, one of the main questions that needs to be addressed before the identification of the resilience process is: resilient to what? This question leads us to identify the various adversities and vulnerabilities as well as potential forms of discrimination this particular group of migrant women may face. I assert that individuals who share these two identity factors (being a woman and undocumented) experience adversities and build resilience in specific and unique ways. However, it should be noted that I also take into consideration other potential identity factors that could shape the experiences of these women such as race, ethnicity, and religion. In this context, intersectionality, as conceptualized by Kimberlé Crenshaw (1989,1991), serves as a lens through which to understand the unique experiences of undocumented migrant women in Belgium. According to Kimberlé Crenshaw: *“Intersectionality is basically a lens, a prism, for seeing the way in which various forms of inequality often operate together and exacerbate each other. We tend to talk about race inequality as separate from inequality based on gender, class, sexuality, or immigrant status. What’s often missing is how some people are subject to all of these, and the experience is not just the sum of its parts”*².

For example, in her 1991 article "Mapping the Margins: Intersectionality, Identity Politics, and Violence Against Women of Color," she pointed out the insufficiency of the feminists and anti-racist approaches. She demonstrated how the anti-discrimination laws failed to protect black women as they did not consider the variety of prejudice that black women faced due to being both women and persons of color. Her approach underlines the importance of considering all different aspects of identity together, rather than separate because that separation can create spaces for oppression. Moreover, intersectionality does not prioritize one form of oppression over another, rather it stresses their interconnection as a “matrix of domination” (Andersen & Collins, 2001). This view posits that various levels of oppression,

² Steinmetz, K. (2020, February 20). She coined the term ‘Intersectionality’ over 30 years ago. Here’s what it means to her today. TIME. <https://time.com/5786710/kimberle-crenshaw-intersectionality/>

originating from social constructions of race, class, and gender, intersect and reinforce each other (Andersen & Collins, 2001). These intersections manifest at the individual level, as people directly experience the social construction of their identities, and at the institutional level, where systems of race, class, gender, and legal status are interconnected and mutually reinforced.

2.2.2 Contextualizing vulnerability

In examining the experiences of undocumented migrant women, it is important to recognize the intersecting vulnerabilities they face due to their gender and migration status as well as acknowledge other identity factors such as race, ethnicity, and religion. However, it is also important to avoid stigmatizing these individuals as solely “vulnerable” and not having agency. Thus, the term “vulnerability” in the current study is not employed to suggest passive victimhood or absence of agency but rather serves as a starting point for understanding the various forms of challenges these women encounter and how they develop resilience afterward. Building upon the definition of Directive 2011/36/EU, the trafficking Directive (2011), vulnerability is viewed as a situation “*in which the person concerned has no real or acceptable alternative but to submit to the abuse involved*”³. This definition challenges deterministic views of vulnerability by showcasing that it is not an inherent or personal trait of individuals but rather a consequence of specific circumstances they find themselves in.

Moreover, “vulnerability” serves as a preliminary categorization prior to the application of an intersectional analysis. It suggests that individuals who are labeled as “vulnerable” in the legal framework do not necessarily fit a passive victim narrative. Instead, they could be individuals with resilience and agency, requiring autonomy and freedom rather than mere protection and shelter. What makes the difference is the actual context in which an individual is situated, referred to as their “position of vulnerability” (Degani & De Stefani, 2020). In the same line of thought, Gilodi et al (2022) argue that vulnerability in the context of migration cannot be reduced to a simple or fixed condition, nor can it be solely attributed to innate characteristics, specific situations, or structural factors. It should be understood as a complex combination of multiple factors. Temporality is also taken into consideration, with the inclusion of individuals’ migration trajectories to better understand how vulnerabilities evolve and manifest at different stages of life and in response to various adverse events (Gilodi et al, 2022).

Therefore, this conceptualization of “vulnerability” will allow for a respectful portrayal that acknowledges both the challenges and the strengths of undocumented migrant women, because it will

³ European Parliament and Council. (2011). Directive 2011/36/EU of the European Parliament and of the Council of 5 April 2011 on preventing and combating trafficking in human beings and protecting its victims, and replacing Council Framework Decision 2002/629/JHA. Official Journal of the European Union. <https://eur-lex.europa.eu/legal-content/EN/TXT/HTML/?uri=CELEX%3A32011L0036>

include the identification of the intersecting vulnerabilities these women may face, but it also acknowledges the possibility to overcome those obstacles.

2.2.3 Intersecting vulnerabilities faced by undocumented migrant women

In my literature review, I noted numerous similarities between the European and American contexts concerning the intersecting vulnerabilities associated with gender and migration status. However, country-specific vulnerabilities have also been noted. These variances are often attributed to differences in migration policies, how these policies are performed, and institutional frameworks, such as healthcare systems, which can produce unique forms or levels of vulnerability.

For example, in the United States, people who are living there without legal permission are watched more closely and always at risk of being sent back to their home country because of the implementation of the Secure Communities Program and section 287 (g) of the Immigration and Nationality Act⁴ (Kline, 2016). Moreover, undocumented migrant women have a hard time getting medical care due to policies like the Affordable Care Act of 2010⁵, which limit their access to health insurance and essential medical aid (Zavella, 2016). This lack of access leaves women vulnerable to untreated medical conditions, especially when they are pregnant or during childbirth (Novak et al., 2017).

Hence, due to the existence of country-specific vulnerabilities, I will present the intersecting vulnerabilities related to gender and migration status in Belgium based on the existing literature to provide a contextual understanding of the current research.

Undocumented migrant women in Belgium encounter a unique set of vulnerabilities exacerbated by limited legal pathways to regularize their status and the opacity of regularization procedures. The complex administrative procedures for residency and asylum applications, along with the decision-making process of the office of foreigners deteriorate the mental health of these women (Toure & Hublau, 2023). Moreover, undocumented women face constant suspicion for instance during marriage procedures, family reunification, and the recognition of their children by a Belgian partner or a foreigner legally residing in Belgium. The constant doubt when dealing with services at the municipal level, as well as from CGRS⁶ regarding their exile stories adds more psychological and emotional stress (Toure & Hublau, 2023).

⁴American Immigration Council. (2021, July 8). The 287(g) program: An overview. American Immigration Council. <https://www.americanimmigrationcouncil.org/research/287g-program-immigration>

⁵ <https://www.nilc.org/wp-content/uploads/2015/11/Immigrants-and-the-ACA-2014-01.pdf>

⁶ <https://www.cgrs.be/en>

Additionally, undocumented migrant women usually face unstable work conditions because they mostly get jobs in areas like house cleaning, hospitality, and agriculture (Toure & Hublau., 2023). These jobs often pay little and have poor working conditions. These sectors are characterized by low wages and poor working conditions. A study by the Fundamental Rights Agency (FRA) on domestic work showed that the specificity of domestic work is that it occurs in private households, which often creates dependency for the worker on their employers. Domestic workers frequently have non-fixed working hours and tasks, which further contribute to their vulnerability (FRA, 2011). Without legal status, they are at risk of being subject to exploitation and abuse by employers, who use their vulnerable situation for economic gain. This exploitation is accentuated by the fear of being exposed and deported, which prevents many of these women from reporting abuses (Toure & Hublau., 2023).

Regarding access to healthcare, although Urgent Medical Aid (UMA) provides undocumented migrant women with the possibility of having access to healthcare to some extent, the administrative procedure makes this access complicated. This involves applying for a medical card through a procedure that includes a social inquiry and multiple follow-up appointments with healthcare and social workers. This intricate system involves various institutions such as the Federal Ministry of Social Integration, municipal Public Centers for Social Welfare, municipal political councils, and healthcare workers across different public healthcare institutions, along with medical humanitarian organizations (Lafaut & Coene, 2023). Moreover, the medical card must be renewed every three months, which means undergoing administrative procedures over and over again and the necessity of maintaining regular interaction with the health system (Lafaut & Coene, 2023). This complexity can potentially discourage people from engaging with the health system. Moreover, the notion of “urgency” is not defined by the law, and is determined by the health workers consulted (Lafaut & Coene, 2023). This means the possibility of denying access to some services if the medical inquiry is viewed as “non-urgent”, leading to inconsistent access to healthcare.

In terms of reproductive healthcare access and governance, exceptional measures are put in place to accelerate the procedures. For example, due to issues related to the Urgent Medical Aid (UMA) process, such as administrative slowness and confidentiality, special arrangements are made by health workers to address the specific needs of undocumented women seeking contraception or abortion (Lafaut & Coene, 2023). However, although this facilitation of access when it comes to reproductive health may seem positive, it can also be viewed as part of a broader political discourse to control the fertility of undocumented migrant women (Lafaut, 2021) rather than addressing their healthcare needs.

Undocumented women also face significant risks of abuse, particularly in domestic settings. The criminalization of irregular stay in Belgium and the requirement for police to report suspected undocumented individuals to migration authorities create a formidable barrier to seeking help (Toure & Hublau., 2023). For instance, the Human Rights Watch report “The Law Was Against Me” revealed that

undocumented migrant women are among the most vulnerable and least visible groups of women who survived domestic violence. The report compiled situations where police failed to protect these women from abuse and instead pursued criminal investigations after being notified of incidences of domestic violence by asking about the legal status of the women (HRW, 2012).

2.3 Undocumented migrant women as active agents

2.3.1 From vulnerability to the expression of agency

As was previously mentioned in this study, I do not recognize undocumented migrant women as the main victims of their circumstances; rather, I view them as active agents. In this perspective, while I have discussed vulnerability, I assess that agency plays a crucial role in understanding their resilience by overcoming and resisting the various vulnerabilities and challenges they face.

The conceptualization of agency refers to the understanding of an individual's capacity to act independently and make choices that influence their own lives (Rydzik & Anitha, 2020). It means acknowledging one's ability to make decisions and take actions based on personal goals and values, rather than being exclusively influenced by external factors. This concept emphasizes the importance of autonomy and self-determination in shaping one's life trajectory (Rydzik & Anitha, 2020). Agency is also seen as a dynamic process where people transform their resources into capabilities for action (Bazzani, 2023). However, personal resources are not only embedded as an internal force; they can emerge from environmental factors operating across micro, meso, and macro levels (i.e., social structures such as family dynamics, institutional policies, and support networks). In this perspective, three ways of exercising agency are identified: adaptation, autonomy, and influence (Bazzani, 2023).

In the context of irregular migration, studying agency involves understanding how irregular migrants navigate restrictions and shape their migration trajectories. Irregular migrants exercise agency through various strategies, including acts of citizenship, becoming imperceptible, and self-integration (Schweitzer, 2017). Migrants' agency is seen as a tool that shifts the focus from vulnerabilities to opportunities, allowing them to cope with challenging environments and strict migration policies.

Moreover, undocumented migrants' agency in the receiving country is defined through their everyday practices and social lives, as well as their incorporation into the labor market. For instance, Chauvin and Garcés-Mascareñas (2014) discuss how irregular migrants who secure employment can portray themselves as more “deserving” migrants. This narrative of “deservingness” is a way for undocumented migrants to challenge negative stereotypes and gain a degree of social acceptance and legitimacy. Additionally, this economic contribution is an important aspect of agency because it makes them valuable participants in the local economy despite being undocumented. Moreover, social capital is considered a key element in the development of undocumented migrant agency. Networks of family,

friends, and civil society organizations provide essential resources and support that facilitate job searches, housing, legal assistance, and protection from deportation (Ambrosini, 2013; Hagan, 2008).

2.3.2 Expression of agency through collective mobilization and individual resistance

As it was mentioned earlier in this section, undocumented migrant women perform their agency in the receiving country through active social engagement. Collective mobilization is one of the significant sites of this engagement. Chimienti (2011) referred to movements like “*Les Sans-Papiers*”, and “hunger strikes” in France where undocumented migrants advocate in public spaces for regularization and the improvement of working conditions. The various sans-papiers movements have included an important presence of women activists, even if this female presence was not always easily accepted by some of their fellow male activists. For example, when the sans-papiers occupation of the Saint-Ambroise church began in 1996, women were an enormous and visible majority among the occupiers. The women also led the way in the occupation of a municipal gymnasium in Cachan in 2006 (Freedman, 2008). There, too, it was women members of the movement who refused to get on the buses laid on by the police prefecture to deport the squatters, which led to the occupation of the gymnasium (Mary & Schulmann, 2006). In Belgium, undocumented migrant women also engaged in various forms of collective mobilization. They often occupy buildings to draw attention to their situation. For instance, they occupied recently with their children a former hotel in Brussels to raise awareness about their precarious living conditions⁷. In Liège, another city situated in the Wallonia region of Belgium, a collective of undocumented migrant women launched a project called “*les masques solidaires*”⁸ (solidarity masks) during the covid-19 pandemic. They managed to sew over 7000 masks. This action was made to meet the demand but also to give visibility to the cause of undocumented migrants. Moreover, a case study conducted in the United States showed how Mexican undocumented migrant women engaged in collective social advocacy through formal policy advocacy rather than traditional protest (Gates, 2017). This type of engagement empowered the undocumented women and positioned them as political actors challenging the dominant views of their marginalized status.

The actions of undocumented migrant women in various contexts and forms showcased the significance of collective mobilization and advocacy in their quest for recognition, rights, and improving their situation. These actions also served as a source of empowerment for them. In addition to collective mobilization, undocumented migrants exercise individual agency through the daily decisions and actions they take to maintain their safety and well-being. It includes strategies to find jobs, when to move for better pay or conditions, how to avoid deportation, and how to stay under the radar of state surveillance (Sigona, 2012b). Vasta (2011) also mentioned forms of micro acts of resistance or what

⁷ <https://www.rtl.be/actu/belgique/societe/des-femmes-et-enfants-sans-papiers-occupent-un-ancien-hotel-woluwe-saint-lambert/2024-01-20/article/628851>

⁸ <https://www.axellemag.be/confection-masques-femmes-sans-papiers-solidaires/>

was referred to as “irregular formality”, such as using fake documents to access employment and seek better opportunities. Additionally, for instance, in the Belgian context, Clarebout & Mescoli (2023) showcased the use of food hospitality as a powerful tool through which undocumented migrant women negotiate their subjectivities and perform their agency. Food practices allowed women in the context of forced displacement and unstable legal status to perform resistance toward marginalization and challenge the narrative of helplessness and dependency.

2.4 Conceptualization of resilience

2.4.1 Resilience: From a mono-dimensional definition to a multi-dimensional construct

The concept of resilience has always been described as having a definitional ambiguity, with no agreement amongst scholars on a common definition (Ungar, 2008). It was acknowledged that resilience is a complex construct, and its definition may vary depending on the context, whether it concerns individuals, families, organizations, societies, or cultures (Southwick et al, 2014).

The dominant view of resilience was that it is constructed on the individual level, meaning that people possess qualities and abilities to “bounce back”, confront adversity, and ultimately achieve positive outcomes (Dagdeviren et al, 2016). Referred to as “psychological fitness”, this dominant paradigm views resilience as a possessing valuable personal resource or capacity, including features such as self-esteem, temperament, and cognitive abilities. In this framework, resilience distinguishes the "resilient" from the "non-resilient," with resilient individuals characterized by their possession of internal resources considered as protective elements in facing adversity (Qamar, 2023).

Individual traits such as being social, intelligent, having a positive self-perception, good communication skills, a sense of humor, problem-solving abilities, and having both physical and mental well-being are regarded as significant (Seccombe, 2002). Okech et al (2012: 431) recognize for instance resilience in those: *“who possess strengths that assist them in recovering from negative experiences; benefit from and contribute to a network of relationships in their communities; seek to restore order and balance to their lives during crises”*.

However, this approach received criticism for oversimplifying resilience processes. It limits our understanding of the social experiences and behaviors (affected by environmental elements) that shape resilience as a diverse and contextualized phenomenon within challenging and changing circumstances (Qamar, 2023). Moving from the “bouncing back” approach which mainly focuses on the individual and immediate level to “bouncing ahead” (Qamar, 2023). This shift in resilience conceptualization acknowledges the dynamic and multidimensional nature of resilience, which is developed with time and characterized by both continuity and progress.

The use of “social resilience” became more accurate to align with the paradigm shift from the individual characteristics approach to the person-environment interaction approach. Social resilience is defined as the capacity of individuals, groups, or communities to endure external shocks and challenges without experiencing significant disturbances (Adger et al, 2002). In this definition, various factors that shape resilience were cited, such as livelihoods, availability of resources, social structures, as well as external shocks and stresses, like shifts in laws and policies (Adger et al, 2002).

Moreover, Keck and Sakdapolrak (2013) illustrate three different phases of resilience: (a) coping abilities: the capacity to manage and face various forms of adversity; (b) adaptive capacities: the ability to draw lessons from past experiences and adapt to future challenges in our daily lives; (c) transformative capacities: refers to the capacity to shape institutional frameworks that promote individual well-being and sustainable societal resilience. In other words, contributing to a positive change on the institutional level, such as migration policy changes to reduce various obstacles and challenges. While coping capacity typically involves a short-term response following adversity, adaptive and transformative capacities can be demonstrated for a long period of time (Akbar & Preston, 2019).

Following this line of thoughts, which view resilience as a multidimensional process, Obrist et al (2010) suggested a multilayered framework explaining how resilience can be developed and enhanced. This framework acknowledges the importance of considering the threats and the competencies required to address them. Depending on the threat under examination, such as the legal status of migrants, distinct social domains may emerge, each comprising a network of actors across different societal levels. These actors, whether social, societal, or individual, improve a person's ability to respond to threats by fortifying their proactive and reactive abilities. However, the extent to which people can access and make use of these resources differs based on where they stand in a given social setting (Obrist et al, 2010). This framework enhances our analytical approach by highlighting important dimensions and dynamics of resilience processes and expressions. First, resilience relies on the threat we examine. In an empirical study, it is considered an important entry point by asking the question: resilience to what? (Obrist et al ,2010). Second, the influence of social-structural context on the development of resilience. In fact, various studies have provided evidence of the impact of external factors on individual’s levels of resilience. Favorable social circumstances, including access to social networks, economic resources, and social services, facilitate resilient actions (Dagdeviren et al 2016; MacKinnon & Derickson, 2013). Building on this understanding of resilience, it is important to explore how these processes function within a socio-ecological framework. By doing so, we will be able to investigate the dynamics between individuals and their environments through a multilevel analysis.

2.4.2 Resilience process as a social-ecological construct

Researchers emphasize the value of a socio-ecological system (SES) analysis in the study of resilience (Crane, 2010). For instance, SES was found to provide opportunities as well as constraints for livelihood

resilience, as well as the capacity for individuals to adjust to unexpected events (Cote, 2012). Therefore, within the framework of the current research, the socio-ecological approach will enable the examination of the possible role that different elements, including personal traits, family members, social networks, community-based organizations, and migration policies, may play in the development of resilience among undocumented migrant women. Bronfenbrenner's (1979) model of human development and Ungar (2015) and Qamar (2023) conceptualization of resilience will be used as analytical tools.

First, understanding the multi-level interactions that occur between people and their environment is crucial to comprehend how resilience factors influence individuals. For this understanding, Bronfenbrenner's (1979) theory of human development offers a useful foundation. According to his socio-ecological theory, a person's development is impacted by a variety of interrelated environmental systems, which can range from small-scale, personal environments (family and peers) to large-scale, societal structures (culture and policy). These systems include the macrosystem, exosystem, mesosystem, microsystem, chronosystem, and mesosystem (Figure 1). Each level can impact individuals differently and consequently shape their lived experiences. A detailed description of each level is presented in table (1).

Figure (1): The socio-ecological model of Bronfenbrenner

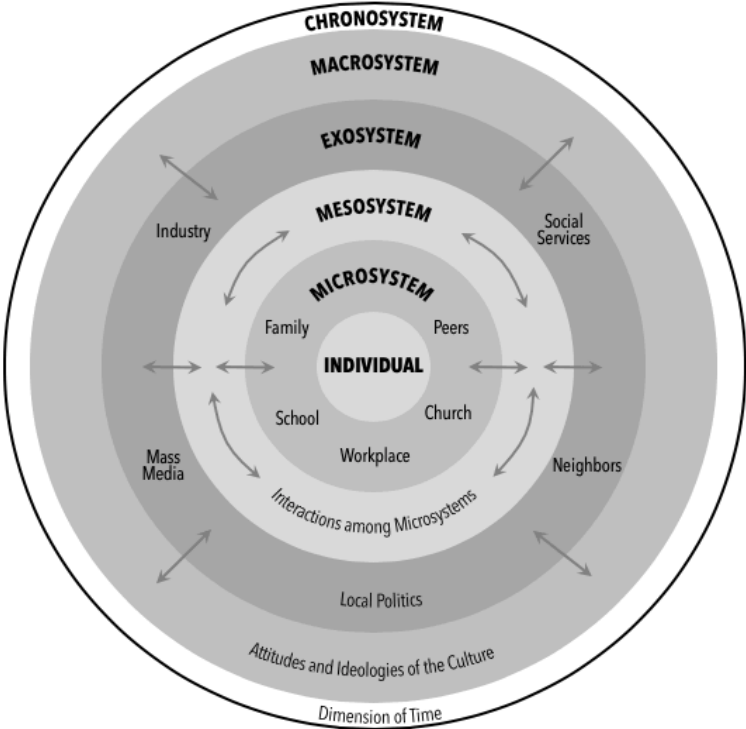


Table (1): A description of the socio-ecological model (SEM) systems

SEM system	Description
Microsystem	It is the closest and most immediate environment in which an individual interacts. It includes the people and settings that the individual directly interacts with on a regular basis, such as family, friends, and school. These interactions are bi-directional, meaning that people are influenced by their direct environment and actively shape and contribute to it
Mesosystem	It refers to the interactions and connections between different aspects of the microsystem. It entails the connections between diverse contexts and interpersonal interactions in a person's life. In other words, a mesosystem is a system of microsystems
Exosystem	It consists of environments or contexts in which the individual does not directly participate but still influences their development indirectly. This can include community systems, the social structures, and institutions, that can potentially impact the individual's life
Macrosystem	It represents the larger cultural, societal, and ideological context in which the individual lives. Important factors of this level of Bronfenbrenner's theory include values, customs, social norms, laws, traditions, ideology, and cultural beliefs
Chronosystem	It refers to the dimension of time in relation to an individual's development. It encompasses the adaptation processes and transitions that people go through throughout their lifetime and the effects they have on their growth

In the same line of thought, Ungar (2015) suggested a social-ecological interpretation of resilience that shows the complex interaction between individuals and their environment in the context of adversity. A detailed description of his model is presented in the following table:

Table (2): An overview of Ungar’s socio-ecological interpretation of resilience

Component	Description
Person (P)	Represents the individual who is facing adversity.
Environment (E)	Refers to the various contexts in which the individual is situated (ex. social, economic, cultural, and environmental factors.)
Strengths (S)	Represent individual’s qualities, skills, resources, and capacities that contribute to resilience.
Challenges (C)	Refers to the obstacles, stressors, or vulnerabilities faced by the individual within their environment.
Resilience processes (R)	Refers to the person's long-term, flexible, and adaptive coping mechanisms to navigate and overcome adversity.
Available and accessible opportunities (O) _{AV, AC}	Signifies the available and accessible resources, support systems, opportunities, and external factors that facilitate the resilience processes.
Meanings systems (M)	Refers to the shared beliefs, attitudes, and interpretations that shape how people perceive their environment and make decisions. These perceptions influence individuals' choices regarding which resources they consider valuable and accessible.

From Ungar’s perspective, the development of resilience will depend on the interaction between the individual and its multi-level socio-ecological systems. In this interaction, the person’s strengths, challenges, and available opportunities within those systems are taken into consideration while being mediated by the socially constructed meaning systems (Ungar, 2015).

Moreover, Qamar’s (2023) provided a conceptualization of resilience within the context of migration, where he emphasized its social dimension. He described resilience as a social phenomenon where vulnerable individuals or groups negotiate their social experiences and practices, and learn how to develop their adaptive and transformational capabilities amidst political, economic, cultural, and social (PECS) environmental changes and challenges. He suggested four key aspects embedded within

institutions that are related to PECS. These aspects influence and shape the ability of migrants to be resilient:

- Status: the migrants' legal status (being documented or undocumented), and employment status as well.
- Access to resources: availability of resources and support from family, community, and broader social and public networks.
- Support: the assistance and protection provided by social networks.
- Visibility: being recognized as an agentic, and active member of society.

In the current research, by applying the social-ecological framework (Bronfenbrenner, 1979; Ungar, 2015; Qamar, 2023), I will be able to identify the multilevel factors and challenges that potentially shape and determine resilience processes among undocumented migrant women. This includes exploring the different resources within the individual level and the social environment in order to determine the extent to which undocumented migrant women engage with these resources to navigate and overcome adversity.

2.4.3 How did the literature address resilience of migrant women?

Within this context, scholars emphasize the importance of considering resilience as the process of surpassing the multifaceted challenges encountered during the entire migration journey. This includes both past and present relocation challenges. Most case studies and ethnographies reviewed for the purpose of this research investigated the resilience of migrant women with various legal statuses from an individual and social perspective. The individual interpretation includes how migrant women develop resilience through internal and personal resources. Studies on the resilience of undocumented Latin migrant women in the United States identified various resilience strategies: acceptance, sociability, leadership, courage, aspirations, endurance, cognitive reframing, behavioral adaptability, and cultural pride (Garcini, et al, 2022; Lemus-Way & Johansson,2020).

Moreover, research has shown that religion and faith play an important role in fostering resilience among migrant women (Cruz, 2006; Sigamoney, 2018; Dixon, 2021). Three faith-based strategies were identified: courageous hope, creative resistance, and steadfast faith (Cruz, 2006). An interesting body of literature addressed intersectionality by showing how migrant women managed to face and overcome racial, ethnic, religious, and gender challenges. Manzanera-Ruiz & al (2024) demonstrated how black migrant women navigated predominantly white educational spaces in Spain by using two key strategies: embracing cultural identity through participating in cultural events and striving for academic excellence. Coping strategies were also among the various internal resources used by migrant women who faced discrimination. Either these women choose to avoid discrimination by staying quiet or ignoring the incident, or they approach the situation by educating the perpetrator and seeking support (Kumar, 2022).

On the other hand, the relational and social interpretation of resilience showed the importance of relationships and community networks in developing resilience. A support system (ex. Family, friends) and a social capital illustrated through different resources such as emotional support, information access, and financial and legal assistance are seen as key elements to overcome adversity (Michael & Țânculescu-Popa, 2024; van der Ham et al, 2014; Rashid & Gregory, 2014). For instance, Ukrainian refugee women relied on social support to deal with post-conflict stressors and effectively manage and adapt to their new surroundings (Michael, 2024). Throughout this review of the literature, it is evident that the resilience of migrant women is better understood through the use of both internal and external resources. Regardless of which resources they use, migrant women showed remarkable efforts to overcome the challenges they face.

However, despite the existing literature on resilience among migrant women, there are still numerous gaps to be addressed, particularly in geographical and disciplinary distribution. Most of the literature available is based in the United States and primarily stems from the psychological disciplines, which, although not entirely unexpected, since resilience is fundamentally a psychological concept. Additionally, within the European context, specifically in Belgium, very limited studies have investigated the resilience of undocumented migrant women from both individual and social perspectives.

Thus, the current study will fill the gap by providing a socio-ecological analysis of resilience among undocumented migrant women in the Belgian context. This approach involves the identification of both internal and external potential factors that foster resilience.

3. Methodology

3.1 Rationale for employing a qualitative research approach

Conducting research on undocumented migrants is not an easy task. Most of them are obliged to navigate precarious lives in grey areas of legal, semi-legal, or illegal activities (Jauhiainen & Tedeschi, 2021). They may hesitate to talk to researchers because of their living situation. They fear that it might attract unwanted attention and exacerbate their already difficult situation. When conducting a study on a population that is often difficult to attain and mostly hidden, it is important to develop an accurate research strategy with clear objectives and a flexible approach (Jauhiainen & Tedeschi, 2021).

In the current study, the aim was to investigate the building process of resilience among undocumented migrant women while identifying the main contributing factors and key challenges they face in their everyday lives due to the absence of legal status. Therefore, I consider the qualitative research approach to be more suitable to achieve these objectives. The qualitative approach gives an understanding of the situation individually, focusing on personal experiences in dealing with an issue. Jackson & Drummond (2007:23) stated in this matter that: “*Qualitative researcher relies on the participants to offer in-depth*

responses to questions about how they have constructed or understood their experience.” Moreover, in the context of studying resilience, qualitative methods appear to be particularly relevant due to the following primary reasons (Ungar, 2003):

- Unnamed processes can be identified.
- Investigation of a phenomenon in a particular context.
- The voices of minority groups are amplified.
- Enhancing trustworthiness by providing detailed contextual description.
- Allowing interaction between the researcher and participants while the researcher is aware of their own social location.

These elements make a qualitative approach to the study of resilience of undocumented migrant women an appropriate choice, as it aligns with the main research questions and objectives. My methodological approach included all of these elements, which are explained in detail in the next sections of this chapter. In conducting this qualitative study, I adopted an ontological position described as a constructionist perspective. An ontological position means that social properties, such as norms, beliefs, and identities are not inherent or pre-existing but are rather a product of interactions between individuals (Bryman, 2012). By applying the constructionist perspective, I recognize that resilience is not solely an innate or individual trait people possess. Rather, it is shaped by interactions with various components of the social environment.

Moreover, within the framework of the qualitative methodology, I approached the fieldwork by developing an ethnographic case study. An ethnographic case study is defined as “*prolonged observations over time in a natural setting within a bounded system.*” (Angers & Machtmes, 2005: 777). An ethnographic case study is best suited when the research aims to study a specific group, limited cases, or culture through immersion in a defined setting such as a school, organization, or family (Angers & Machtmes, 2005). This is relevant to my research, as I immersed myself in the organizations where undocumented migrant women operate.

3.2 Data collection methods

3.2.1 Participant observation process

Participant observation is a way to have an in-depth understanding of an observed group. It is considered an open method in which the researcher-observer can collect much more information than he/she had anticipated beforehand (Corbin & Strauss, 2008; Creswell, 2007). It usually involves active participation in the social setting under study, which allows the researcher to gain an understanding that cannot be achieved through any other means. The researcher has direct access not only to the observable physical environment but also to the realities of human experiences, feelings, and thoughts (Scott & Kosslyn, 2015). Moreover, this approach requires long-term-engagement and finding a way to balance intimacy

with estrangement (Alpa, 2017). In other words, the researcher has to find a space that is close enough to understand the insiders' perspectives while maintaining a certain distance to provide objectivity.

In relation to the current study, participant observation proved to be a highly relevant method for gaining insight into the daily lives of undocumented migrant women. The long-term-engagement allows for gaining trust and confidence, increasing the possibility of seeing a broader spectrum of situations involving undocumented migrant women and having a deeper understanding of their experiences (Jacobsen & Karlsen, 2021). Therefore, I view participant observation as an essential part of data collection, as it offered me the opportunity to insert myself in the environments where undocumented migrant women operate. However, it is worth mentioning that I took on the role of a partial participant observer, dedicating several hours to a few days per week to my fieldwork. I observed these women mostly through the activities they were involved in within the associations that were part of my study. I have also observed these women's participation in external activities such as food selling at a festival and taking part in a demonstration advocating for undocumented migrant rights.

This involvement helped subsequently with the interview process, as I gained acceptance and the participants felt that they could open up and talk about their experiences. Moreover, the partially participating observer also refers to the fact that observation was not the main data source. Interviews were also part of my data collection tools, and as Bryman (2012: 433) stated: "*Interviews and documents can be as significant as observation and sometimes more significant as sources of data*".

Participant observation is a flexible research method that can be applied in various ways. Thus, it is important to clearly explain how I used this method in my study in order to assess the quality of the research. In the following section, I will therefore provide a description of my fieldwork, focusing specifically on my observations of the undocumented migrant women and their interactions with the social environment in different sites. I conducted fieldwork from February to May 2024 in the province of Liege. My research took place across four main Civil Society Organizations⁹: Organization (A)¹⁰,

⁹ In this study, I made the decision not to reveal the real names of the associations in which the undocumented migrant women operate. Although I primarily assured the anonymity of the participants by using pseudonyms, I aimed at protecting their identity to the fullest extent possible by not disclosing the names of the associations as well, as they could potentially be identified through them.

¹⁰ Organization A is a feminist non-profit organization focused on lifelong education. It brings together women from diverse backgrounds across Brussels and Wallonia to collaborate and campaign. The movement proposes various activities such as workshops, training, volunteering opportunities, and activism.

Organization (B)¹¹, Organization (C)¹², Organization (D)¹³. It should be noted that these four CSOs were not chosen randomly. I selected organizations that work with migrant populations of varying legal status, particularly the ones that work with migrant women.

From the beginning, I was transparent about my objectives. I introduced myself as a master's student in sociology, specializing in migration and ethnic studies, conducting research on the "resilience process of undocumented migrant women". I explained the concept of "resilience" using simple language and provided examples. I stated that my aim is to highlight and identify the various forms of the active engagement of undocumented migrant women through their interaction with their social environment. This aspect of their lives was often overlooked, as the focus was mainly on their vulnerabilities.

In February, I began my fieldwork with two CSOs: Organization (A) and Organization (B). I participated in four round table discussions, where we talked about: women's health, the electoral system in Belgium, daily social integration practices, and French language courses. The first goal of these round tables was to increase women's autonomy. The group was a mixed composition of migrants and Belgian women. Although in the first session, the workshop facilitator had told me in advance that there would be a few undocumented women, I never directly questioned their status, nor did they reveal this information during the round tables. It is worth mentioning that not knowing who the undocumented migrant women were from the beginning did not cause an issue. In the early stages of my research, it was not my immediate concern to identify the undocumented migrant women. My aim was to first immerse myself in the associations in which they were involved. These two associations in particular served as a starting point for my fieldwork. I needed time to get familiar with how these associations operate, the activities they offer, and the overall environment, as it was my first time being there.

However, because of scheduling conflicts, my presence in these two associations was limited, and I could not be as often as I would have liked. Nevertheless, I gathered valuable information during my brief involvement.

From March to May, I conducted participant observation at Organization (C), at the "sewing workshop" located within the premises of another CSO. I went to Organization (C) every Monday from 10 a.m. to 2 p.m., because that was the scheduled working day for the women attending the workshop. I consider

¹¹ Organization B is a partnership-based non-profit organization that fights against all forms of exclusion. It developed projects focused on refugees, individuals seeking asylum, undocumented migrants, people under subsidiary protection, and migrants who arrived through family reunification schemes

¹² Organization C brings together documented and undocumented migrants who want to invest their skills for the benefit of the community. Various activities are proposed such as cooking, sewing, logistics, construction, and mechanics. It allows those who are excluded from the labor market to thrive by creating their own employment opportunities.

¹³ Organization D is a local integration initiative that offers activities and training programs for individuals on the integration path. This organization focuses on interculturality, citizenship, and combating racism in its various forms. The association uses pedagogical methods and social support services to promote the social inclusion of foreigners.

Organization (C) to be the main site of my fieldwork, as it allowed me to integrate deeply into the group of women, building trust and friendships. I participated in various organizational activities, such as preparing food for lunch breaks, organizing materials, and arranging the workspace after the workshops. Additionally, I was assigned to help elaborate the “internal regulations of the workshop”, after I gathered the suggestions made by the women participating in the sewing workshop.

My involvement with Organization (C) went beyond internal activities. I also participated in external events, such as the attendance of a classical music concert at “Musée de la Boverie”, dedicated to the children of “La voix des sans-papiers de Liège”. At this event, Organization (C) set a selling point at the venue. It was an opportunity for the women to show their products and sell them to the audience who attended the concert.

Moreover, I was also involved in another CSO “Organization D” from April through the first two weeks of May. My primary intention in conducting my fieldwork in four different organizations was to obtain a diverse range of migrant women’s profiles and experiences.

During my participant observation at Organization (D), I was part of the “Solidarity housing project”. The project consists of providing housing for undocumented migrants who have no place to live. We had to raise funds, furnish the house, make the needed repairs, and clean it to ensure it was ready to welcome the beneficiaries. I have also participated in work meetings with all the members of the organization, where we discussed various topics, from budget to future projects.

However, my fieldwork was not limited to my immersion in these four associations. I made the personal choice to participate in events focusing on migration issues, specifically those addressing the question of undocumented migrants. Consequently, I attended four events that allowed me to gather a broader perspective on current migration challenges, especially regarding migration policies at both the Belgian and European levels. The four events in question were: A film screening of “Illegal” which was followed by an open debate, a political debate at “Cité Miroire” with representatives from political parties, the “Réve general festival”¹⁴ where I attended a photography exhibition and a theater piece with migration being the main topic, and finally, the annual demonstration in front of the detention center for undocumented migrants in Vottem¹⁵. What was beneficial about attending these events was the diversity of the audience. Members of support collectives for undocumented migrants, actors from various civil society organizations, trade unions, ordinary Belgian citizens, and undocumented individuals, including the women who participated in my research, were all present. This enabled me to observe the interaction

¹⁴ <https://revegeneral.be/>

¹⁵ It was a march to the detention center of Vottem in Liège, Belgium organized by the CRACPE (Collectif de Résistance Aux Centres Pour Etrangers), (Collective of Resistance Against Detention Centers for Foreigners). The claims of the demonstration were centered around the closure of detention centers for migrants besides assessing their rights.

between these different actors and also see how undocumented migrant women occupied public spaces and how they negotiated this form of visibility with more or less constraint. Finally, after each participant observation, whether at the four main sites of the selected associations or the external events I attended, I took notes and summarized the key elements I found useful for my research during my bus ride home. Additionally, I took immediate notes while in the field in order to capture as much data as possible.

3.2.2 Semi-structured interviews with undocumented migrant women

Semi-structured interviews involve a verbal interaction initiated by the interviewer with a respondent, who is initially placed in the role of an informant holding valuable non-scientific knowledge on the topic of interest (Pin, 2023). Moreover, semi-structured interviews cover a wide range of instances. It usually refers to a situation in which the interviewer has prepared a set of questions in the general form of an interview schedule, but the sequence of questions can vary. The questions are often somewhat more general in their frame of reference than those typically found in a structured interview. Although the researcher has to develop an interview grid, the use of it should not be rigid (Pin, 2023). In this sense, semi-structured interviews provide a larger space for flexibility, where the interviewee can talk freely and openly (Bryman, 2012) without feeling like they are being interrogated. Allowing the conversation to flow naturally makes the respondent more comfortable, resulting in more genuine and valuable responses.

Additionally, the goal of using this method of interviewing is that the interviewee assumes the role of informant in a conversational manner. In other words, the respondent provides comprehensive information, both objective (about the phenomena, institutions, or processes studied) and subjective (about their representations, values, and beliefs). The fluidity and quality of the interview rely largely on the attitude of empathy and attentive listening that the interviewer may have, and that will allow them to adaptively use their question grid during the discussion (Kaufmann, 2016). That being said, I will elaborate in the following section on the process of conducting semi-structured interviews in the current study and the challenges encountered.

I conducted nine semi-structured interviews with undocumented migrant women between April and May, out of the 13 interviews originally planned. One interview had to be canceled due to scheduling conflicts. Another participant, although she agreed to do the interview three times, showed hesitation and avoidance before each scheduled meeting. Though she displayed willingness, I felt her discomfort and made the choice not to proceed, prioritizing her comfort and autonomy. Moreover, two women gave me their personal phone numbers so we could schedule a meeting, but due to the limited interaction I had with them, I preferred not to conduct the interviews. My approach was based on treating each woman as an individual rather than just a data point to fulfill my sample quota. Being able to build relationships before interviewing the person was a fundamental aspect of my methodology.

I approached the fieldwork with the primary intention of establishing a climate of trust with the women I met in the associations or outside the associations through my personal network. It was important for me that these women got to know me before interviewing them, knowing they would share their lived experiences with me. I consider this process to be more than just collecting data for academic purposes, but also a form of social engagement that recognizes and respects these women's personal and intimate narratives. In this matter, (Fassin, 2001:45) stated: “[...] *It moves the researcher from solely generating knowledge about the social world to that of action in the social world.*” [free translation]

Therefore, after I felt that I had built a certain level of proximity, I gradually started scheduling my interviews, which I did not label as such during the whole process. I used the term “individual discussions” (in French) as it aligned more with my scientific approach, which prioritizes relational and human aspects over just considering these women as “research subjects”. Seven interviews were conducted with women I met during my participant observation, mainly at Organization (C) and Organization (D). Two of the interviews were with women I met through my personal network. They were enthusiastic about participating in my study because they believed that my research topic was empowering for them in the sense that it would help portray a positive side of the lives of undocumented migrant women. Furthermore, the majority of the participants agreed to be interviewed in order to help me achieve the objectives of my thesis. In terms of the location of the interviews, six took place in an office beside the premises of the “sewing workshop”. One interview took place at the woman’s workplace, and two women invited me to their home to conduct the interviews.

Before the beginning of each interview, I reminded the participants of my research topic, briefly presented the themes that would be discussed, asked them if they had any questions, and emphasized that participation was voluntary and that they could withdraw at any time if they wished. I assured them that I would use pseudonyms to avoid their identities being revealed. I also asked for permission to record the interviews using my personal phone. Eight out of nine women agreed. For the one who preferred not to be recorded, I took notes during our discussion. The interviews were conducted in three languages: French, Arabic, and English, depending on the language the respondents were most comfortable with. The interviews lasted between 25 minutes to 1 hour and 45 minutes. I started the interviews by asking them to present themselves as they wished, including mentioning their country of origin and the length of their stay in Belgium. I considered these two indicators to be valuable for my research. The first indicator would help me assess the homogeneity or heterogeneity of my sample in terms of geographical diversity and migration trajectories. The second indicator could potentially influence the type of resilience undocumented women may build.

My sample represented participants from five countries: Congo, Cameroun, Nigeria, Tunisia, and Rwanda. The average duration of their stay in Belgium was 10 years, with the longest being 16 years and the shortest being 6 years, as shown in the following table:

Table (3): Participants country of origin and length of stay in Belgium

Participants pseudonyms	Country of origin	Length of stay in Belgium (years)
Carine	Congo	10
Diara	Congo	7
Josiane	Rwanda	8
Nour	Tunisia	16
Ani	Congo	12
Marie-Louise	Rwanda	10
Zaynab	Congo	6
Lylie	Cameroun	12
Doris	Nigeria	8

The conversations were divided into four main parts:

- **Introductory questions:** These included questions regarding the pre-migratory process, such as reasons for migration and their professional and educational background in their country of origin.
- **Lived experiences upon arrival in Belgium:** This included questions such as the various challenges they encountered.
- **Contributing internal and external factors to resilience:** It included questions such as the individual resources they had to overcome adversities; the various forms of engagement in associations; and individual and collective initiatives they may have developed.
- **Aspirations and future goals.**

Although I had predefined grid questions, I adapted my questions according to the singularities of each woman's story while maintaining the main themes of my research. In fact, I avoided asking some questions to certain women, as I did not want them to feel in a vulnerable position, as they were sharing

very sensitive information. In other instances, I added follow-up questions for further clarification or when I felt that the respondent did not understand my initial question well. For further details, the interview guide can be found as an appendix.

3.3 Data analysis

In this research, a thematic analysis was adopted. According to (Braun & Clarke, 2012: 57): “*Thematic analysis is a method for systematically identifying, organizing, and offering insight into patterns of meaning (themes) across a dataset. Through focusing on meaning across a dataset, thematic analysis allows the researcher to see and make sense of collective or shared meanings and experiences.*”. I chose thematic analysis because it is highly flexible and allows for a large amount of freedom for the researcher on how to deal with the data.

To reach the objectives of this research, I analyzed the data by following both inductive and deductive reasoning. First, I was guided by what was generated from the data I collected during the fieldwork (field notes, and transcripts of semi-structured interviews). This means that some codes and themes emerged directly from the data itself (Braun & Clarke, 2012). Second, it is worth mentioning that while I prioritized the inductive approach, the deductive approach can be seen in the construction of the interview guide as well as the conduct of the interviews, where I focused on specific concepts derived from my theoretical framework. For instance, I used the socio-ecological framework (Bronfenbrenner, 1979; Ungar, 2015) to address questions related to “resilience processes”. Given its multilevel perspective, I included questions about individual characteristics, family members, social networks, and civil society organizations as potential contributing factors to “resilience”.

All interviews and field notes were transcribed verbatim. All participant names were anonymized and replaced by pseudonyms. After transcription, the data was read multiple times to ensure it was accurate. Following this, I used Nvivo software for the coding process because it was less time-consuming, and helped in organizing the data and identifying emerging themes, and patterns.

First, I imported the English transcripts of the interviews and the field notes into Nvivo. Through the analysis process, I often went back to the original transcripts to ensure the accuracy and context of the data. I used open coding to label and categorize the themes and concepts. I systematically coded the data by looking for recurring themes and patterns. I created nodes for each identified theme. For instance, I had nodes like “housing conditions”, “economic challenges”, and “access to health care”. Relevant excerpts from the transcripts were highlighted and assigned to these nodes. After that, I used axial and selective coding, which identified connections between the open codes. For instance, the nodes I mentioned above were all grouped into one broader category of “intersecting vulnerabilities and challenges faced by undocumented migrant women”. As I assembled various connected categories into a core category, I was able to generate a coherent narrative of the findings.

3.4 Strategies for ensuring the issue of trustworthiness

The trustworthiness and validity of qualitative research, as well as transparency of the conduct of the study, are crucial to the usefulness and integrity of the findings (Cope, 2014). Thus, it was important for me as a researcher conducting a qualitative study to address trustworthiness issues similar to the traditional quantitative issues of validity and reliability. The degree of confidence in the data, interpretation, and procedures employed to assure the quality of a study is what ensures trustworthiness (Polit & Beck, 2014). From this perspective, researchers should develop the protocols and methods for their study to be worthy of consideration by readers (Amankwaa, 2016).

Following Guba's (1981) construct to ensure trustworthiness in qualitative research, I outline in the following section the strategy employed in the current study. Two main elements are highlighted: credibility and transferability.

3.4.1 Credibility

Credibility is one of the most important factors in ensuring trustworthiness in a study (Lincoln & Guba, quoted by Andrew, 2004: 64). Strategies for ensuring credibility include prolonged engagement with participants, triangulation of the data, persistent observation if deemed appropriate to the study, peer-debriefing, member-checking, and reflective journaling. The iterative questioning of data and returning to the data several times can also be reported as part of the evidence base for analysis (Connelly, 2016). To increase the credibility of this study, I opted for three strategies, such as prolonged presence in the field, triangulation of data collection methods, and ensuring honesty in informants.

First, my fieldwork involved four months spent in four associations, to which I was granted access for my research. My participation in each association varied in duration. During these months, I immersed myself in various activities. I took part in the conversations during round-table sessions and participated in internal and external activities with the members of the associations, including the undocumented migrant women. This immersion helped me develop a level of comfort, understanding, and trust, as well as good relationships with the women who were part of my research. This is significant, as Guillemin and Heggen (2009: 292) note: "*The purpose of establishing rapport between researcher and participant is to both generate rich data while at the same time ensuring respect is maintained between researcher and the participants.*" Having a good rapport with the participants can lead to quality information and data access.

Second, I used the strategy of triangulation in my data collection tools. The use of differing methods compensates for the limitations of one method while exploiting the benefits of the other (Guba, 1981; Brewer & Hunter, 1989). In the current study, a triangulation between observation methods and semi-structured interviews was made to enhance the value of the findings.

Third, to ensure the honesty of the participants, I adopted tactics that included voluntary and genuine participation. I communicated to all women I met during my fieldwork and who could potentially participate in my research that participation is voluntary and they have the choice to decline involvement, ensuring the data collection concerns only those who are genuinely willing to contribute freely and without any pressure.

3.4.2 Transferability

Merriam (1998, quoted by Shenton, 2004:69) in her explanation of transferability notes that external validity “*is concerned with the extent to which the findings of one study can be applied to other situations*”. Since most qualitative research investigates a small number of specific environments and individuals, the aim of the current study was not to generalize the results; rather, it dealt with the possibility of applying the outcomes to other contexts. To achieve this, the researcher has the duty to provide adequate contextual information regarding the fieldwork and the research process in order for the reader to make such a transfer (Lincoln & Guba, 1985). Examples of elements of contextualization include (Andrew, 2004):

- The number of associations included in the study, as well as their location.
- The sample and limitations in terms of profiles and variety.
- Methodological choices to enter the fieldwork.
- Duration of the period of data collection and the frequency of the presence in the fieldwork.

Therefore, to enhance the possibility of transferability of the results of the current study, I provided a detailed description of the fieldwork that includes the elements cited above.

3.5 Reflexivity and limitations of the research

There are a few elements of the research process that require some critical reflection. First, my study sample consisted primarily of undocumented women who attended the sewing workshop (Organization (C)). Although I also interacted with women I met in the other three associations (Organization A, Organization B, Organization D), and through my personal network, I could not reach the level of diversity in profiles that I had aimed for in terms for example of ethnic backgrounds. Additionally, the sample size can be viewed as relatively small, which can be a limitation in terms of generalizing the results. While a few additional women had agreed to participate in my research, I chose not to include them because I was unable to establish the necessary level of rapport with them, as I mentioned earlier in my thesis. My methodological approach can be viewed as a limitation as well because it requires extensive time and consistent engagement in the field while having limited time when doing research for a master’s thesis. That said, the small size of my sample does not diminish the quality of the research, as I initially did not aim for generalization of the findings but for transferability, which was met through my research design.

Second, language can also be considered a limitation of this study. The majority of the interviews and interactions were in French, besides Arabic and English. Given that my thesis is written in English, translation may miss certain contextual nuances, and some elements may lose their meaning when translated. Additionally, because the fieldwork was in the francophone region of Belgium, French was the predominant language used. However, it is neither the respondents' nor the researcher's native language. Consequently, the levels of proficiency in French varied between the women, and this variation could potentially affect the data collected. Finally, during participant observation, some conversations among the women were held in their native languages, which I could not always understand. As a result, I might have missed some valuable information relevant to my research.

Nevertheless, it is worth mentioning that my proficiency in three languages (Arabic, French, and English) with Arabic as my mother tongue, along with my understanding of various Arabic dialects, is considered a strength for this research. This linguistic capability helped me communicate more easily, avoid misunderstandings, and engage in discussions outside the framework of my study. It played a crucial role in building a close relationship with the undocumented migrant women.

Moreover, reflecting on the empirical material, I also have to consider my own positionality and how it could potentially influence the sample and the way I approached the fieldwork. Positionality (Savin-Baden & Major 2013: 71): “*reflect the position that the researcher has chosen to adopt within a given research study*”, in addition to where the researcher is positioned in relation to the research participants. In the current study, I would say that I was neither completely an outsider nor an insider, but I emphasize that my own identity put me in different positions during my fieldwork (Milligan, 2016; Abulghod, 1988).

My identity as a woman made it easy for me to interview and observe women, as some women were open to sharing intimate life stories. For example, some women talked with me about their experiences of domestic violence, something that might have been difficult for them to discuss if I were a man. As a migrant woman myself, I shared some similar experiences with the participants. For instance, during our discussions, some women voiced that they experienced racism because of their ethnicity and the color of their skin, something I have experienced as well because of my origin as a Maghrebi woman. I have also shared cultural similarities with one of the participants who was from Tunisia, which allowed me to have a deeper understanding of some aspects of her lived experience in her country of origin, for instance in terms of women's positions in society and expectations attached to them. However, I was not familiar with the experiences women had because of their undocumented status, and the extent of the challenges they face in their daily life. Lastly, I acknowledge that my own values could potentially produce biases and assumptions about the group under study. For instance, my belief in women's empowerment results in interpreting women's experiences through a feminist lens, focusing on empowerment and agency even when the women themselves may not express these terms.

Although social scientists are expected to remain as value-free and objective as possible, the nature of qualitative research involves the risk of our values interfering with our approach (Bryman, 2012). That being said, it was important for me to be self-reflective throughout the whole research process and identify my own biases.

4. Results

4.1 Introduction of the chapter

This chapter presents the main findings resulting from the analysis of the empirical material collected in the field through interviews with undocumented migrant women and participant observation at the multiple sites where I conducted my research. A thematic approach was applied to analyze the data while connecting the emerging themes to the research questions. This chapter was organized into four main parts: The first three parts were built around the major identified themes, as summarized in the following table: intersecting vulnerabilities and challenges, which includes seven sub-themes and factors contributing to resilience, which include two levels (individual and social level). The individual level includes two sub-themes, and the social level includes three sub-themes. Aspirations and future goals are divided into five sub-subthemes. The last part includes a socioecological analysis of the findings.

Table (4): Thematic Map

Intersecting vulnerabilities and challenges	Factors contributing to resilience	Aspirations and future goals
<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Structural and systemic barriers to regularization • Housing and precarious living conditions • Economic vulnerabilities • Health and well-being challenges • Fear of arrest and deportation • Racism and discrimination • Gender-based violence 	<p>At the individual level:</p> <ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Individual attributes • Individual initiatives <p>At the social level:</p> <ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Family and friends • Support from fellow undocumented migrant women • Civil Society Organizations 	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Regularization • Professional aspirations • Autonomy and financial independence • Stability • Continuation of advocacy and solidarity

4.2 Intersecting vulnerabilities and challenges faced by undocumented migrant women

The analysis has shown that undocumented migrant women faced various challenges and vulnerabilities arising from the intersection of multiple factors such as the absence of legal status, gender, socio-economic conditions, religion, and racial and ethnic backgrounds.

Structural and systemic barriers to regularization:

The conversations I had with the undocumented migrant women revealed numerous structural and systemic challenges that complicate the regularization process. It should be mentioned that those barriers were found in three regularization schemes the women applied for: asylum, exceptional circumstances (Article 9bis), and the renewal of resident permit for students.

One of the most significant barriers that was highlighted by all the participants was the prolonged period of waiting and the high rate of application rejections. Lylie, who introduced an appeal when her resident permit for students (A-card) renewal got rejected, stated:

“I told myself it would take 3 months. In short, I did not know that the appeal would take so long. So the appeal lasted 3 years [...] There is no law that says that there is a time limit for an appeal. That is how it is actually and they do not care.”

It should be noted that Lylie was able to stay legally in Belgium while she was waiting for the response to her appeal, and she was able to continue her studies as well because her school was understanding of her situation.

Diara expressed the same issue:

“Although we have submitted requests for regularization, I have submitted them since 2020. Until today, I have not yet had a response. Every time, the lawyer asks, it is always, your file is being processed.”

Zaynab, who was living in the reception center for asylum seekers Fedasil¹⁶, experienced rejection in her various attempts for regularization:

¹⁶ <https://www.fedasil.be/fr>

“So, I was off to the interviews. I did three interviews. I had refusals. There were appeals, and in the end, they gave me a refusal. And then they asked me to leave the reception center towards the return center. [...], we submitted the Article 9bis application for regularization because we are integrated, we speak French, we have been in Belgium for three years, we are already integrated, and my son was already at school. But now they refused. They did not accept the Article 9bis request. So, I am in this situation. My lawyer filed appeals, but an appeal that is not suspensive does not suspend the decision taken by the immigration office.”

This cycle of waiting without clear communication or timeline left most of the participants in a constant state of anxiety and uncertainty. Moreover, proving integration, which is one of the elements that could potentially enhance the chances of being regularized, seemed to be difficult. In fact, many of the undocumented migrant women expressed that despite providing extensive documentation such as school records of their children, testimonies from civil society actors, and proficiency in French, they were unable to get a positive response. Carine voiced her frustration regarding the issue of proving integration:

“You are asked to prove the integration. How to prove integration, you do not have the right to training, you don't have the right to anything.”

The financial costs of the regularization process further exacerbated the situation of the participants, limiting their ability to engage in the process in the first place. Carine stated in this matter:

“As I said, for the request we have to pay a fee. At the time, I paid 363 euros, but now it is 350 euros.”

This requirement to pay fees highlights a fundamental paradox: expecting undocumented migrants to have an income while denying access to legal avenues to secure formal employment.

Moreover, the limited or absence of viable legal pathways within the immigration system reflects its exclusionary nature. Lylie showcased how, after her numerous requests for regularization failed, she was left with two potential options that may force her to take actions she would not ordinarily consider:

“[...] There are two options for you [...]¹⁷, it is either legal cohabitation or having a child, and I said to myself no, but I am not going to do things like that for papers”

She continued by saying that initially, she used to judge women who take these options to obtain legal status, but over time, she came to understand them, recognizing that is how the system is made. She mentioned also that when she was younger, she did not consider these options even if many people suggested them to her, but as years passed by, even her own family started putting pressure on her to

¹⁷ Elements in the quote were not included, as it was the researcher who was speaking and not the participant.

potentially take these options, as she became a burden for them by not having her papers. Reflecting on this, we can see that there are interesting gender and power dynamics that can differ between men and women. In terms of power dynamics, women who pursue these strategies for regularization may be more susceptible to forms of exploitation. Men on the other hand may also face power imbalance but are relatively in a better position, as societal expectations frame them as economic providers. This expectation may give them some level of power and control despite depending on their partner to maintain their legal status. Additionally, during my participant observation at the Festival “Le Réve General”¹⁸, Carine intervened in an open debate about migration-related issues. She confirmed these structural barriers or what she referred to as institutional violence:

“I lost my residence permit and I entered a life of violence. To live without an administrative existence is to experience exploitation at work, administrative violence, suspicion, declining health, and limited care. Having to constantly justify these integration efforts without having the right to work.” (Field note, 19th April, 2024)

The structural and systemic barriers to regularization can be considered a foundational challenge for undocumented migrant women. As a consequence of these barriers, various forms of vulnerability are produced.

Housing and precarious living conditions:

The testimonies of the women I interviewed revealed distressing realities. In fact, all the participants experienced or are experiencing difficult living conditions in terms of housing, whether it was in the centers, shelters, occupations, or private renting. One of the two women who invited me to their homes to conduct the interviews, Diara, explained that before getting a more appropriate living space for her and her children, she used to live at the office where we were having the conversation. That space lacked essential facilities like a shower and bathroom, and they stayed in that situation for almost two years. Moreover, most of the participants described their housing as overcrowded, where several individuals share tiny rooms. Sanitation was poor, with blocked pipes, which resulted in some health issues. Carine stated in this matter:

“First of all, the building was declared unsanitary, where you had almost eight people in a room, it smelled so bad that I could not stand it, and I could not see myself at least going to sleep in those conditions [...] there was not a minimum of human dignity.”

Additionally, instances of exploitative rental arrangements were also highlighted, as some owners took advantage of their undocumented status. For instance, requests for unpaid domestic work (ex. Cleaning) without predefined working hours if there was a late rent payment, knowing that undocumented migrants

¹⁸ <https://revegetal.be/>

do not have a regular income, these instances can happen very often, and owners are usually aware of it in the first place.

Economic vulnerabilities:

Most of the participants had problems managing their daily lives because of the absence of a regular income. Although they had informal jobs or worked as volunteers in various associations, it did not provide them with a sustainable and secure income. As a result, they often rely on the solidarity and support of individuals and associations to fulfill their basic needs. For example, participants received food and clothing donations. Diara who is a mother of five kids described her economic struggles and how it affects her children as well:

“Already, when you are without papers, you are not allowed to work, it is complicated. You see, when you are a mother of five children, how are you going to feed them? You have to pay for bus subscriptions. Kids need to go to school, and sometimes they need snacks. But you see we are limited, we cannot work, we have no income. We do not even have family allowances. We have nothing, nothing, nothing. We are here like that”

She further stated that she relies most of the time on the donations of CSOs and the generosity of people. This situation showed how undocumented migrant women depend heavily on solidarity to access basic needs such as food. Their economic vulnerability is accentuated when they have families and children to support. The barrier to securing a regular income creates a cycle of precarity and insecurity for these women.

Health and well-being challenges:

Many of the women I interviewed and also observed during my participant observation, in particular at the “sewing workshop” had physical and psychological health issues. In terms of psychological well-being, it was mostly related to their undocumented status, living conditions, the long period of waiting, rejection of regularization applications, and uncertainty. These factors made them feel depressed and stressed. In this regard, two participants stated:

“I got a negative answer. So, I could not continue and I was discouraged and then I left everything. I was even a little depressed” (Marie-Louise)

“Frankly, every time I went to see the lawyer, I left demoralized, disoriented, I was under stress. I was in all my states, staying like that for days” (Lylie)

In terms of physical health issues, I noticed during my fieldwork at the sewing workshop:

“Some women frequently encounter health problems that compromise their work. They suffer from back pain, eyesight problems, and injuries. These physical issues are often the result of lack of access to appropriate medical care, and sometimes the women neglect these issues because they do not have the resources to treat them.” (Field note, 22th April, 2024)

Moreover, in terms of access to health care, although most undocumented women are provided certain access through Urgent Medical Aid, numerous limitations were addressed. One of the significant challenges was the extensive documentation and formalities required to obtain medical assistance, along with coordination issues within the healthcare system. Furthermore, because some treatments are not covered, most undocumented women are compelled to pay the bills themselves. In this regard, Zaynab shared her experience when she was at the reception center for asylum:

“Once I was sick, there was a nurse who was not from Fedasil. When our reception center doctor was present, she was with her. So she consulted me once. She also consulted my son, and then she prescribed medication. When I gave the prescription to the nurses, they told me no, we do not buy that, we do not cover this treatment, we will give the alternative. So, there are certain treatments and certain medications that are not covered by Fedasil insurance. [...] So, if you want the treatment, you will have to find out how to buy while we are able to do so”.

She then continued to explain the lack of coordination between services, which resulted in confusion, and additional problems in terms of effective access to health care:

“Additionally, there is too much confusion in their system. I think there is not enough communication between services. I can say that this is the third time that there have been errors in my file. When I was at the reception center, I had to pay a bill with my own expenses, which cost me 230 euros. The nurses told me that no, Fedasil does not take care of it. I paid because the bill was in my name. For fear that it could increase, I paid.”

However, it should be noted that some participants acknowledged the utility and importance of urgent medical aid despite its shortcomings. They appreciated it as a form of health care and were grateful for having this option, as it allowed them to have some proper treatment.

Fear of arrest and deportation:

The data from the majority of the participants' testimonies revealed the constant fear of arrest and deportation as a significant vulnerability that affects their daily decisions and interactions. Many experienced phases of social isolation and reluctance to seek help. They avoided public spaces, including sometimes health care, civil society organizations, and different administrations, due to the fear of being reported. Two women stated in this matter:

“I thought maybe when you just go outside like that, when the police see you, directly you go back to your country.” (Diara)

“I was very scared even to register for the health care assistance, I did not want to because for me, I was actually going to expose myself and I was going to be arrested.” (Carine)

During my fieldwork, I sometimes took the bus home with the women who were part of my research from the sewing workshop. When we were at the bus station, an unusual number of police officers were present. I noticed one of the women became very self-conscious and vigilant, which confirms this constant fear of being arrested.

Racism and discrimination:

The issue of racism and discrimination was highlighted by most of the undocumented women I interviewed. However, it should be mentioned that some of them stated that they did not experience direct racial insults; but they faced other forms of discrimination when looking for housing because of their undocumented situation, such as not being able to rent a house because they did not have a regular income. Public transportation, specifically the bus, was frequently mentioned as a site for racial insults. Two participants provided examples of their experiences:

“Sometimes, on the bus, you will see people who insult you, macaques, all that.” (Diara)

“Ah, you stole my phone, you stole my phone, it is always like that, you are here to rob people, to reach into people's pockets.” (Marie-Louise)

The context of Marie-Louise's experience involved a situation where the bus was overcrowded, and she was trying to get on the bus, and an individual accused her of stealing because she was too close to him. This incident was a clear example of a process of racialization. Marie-Louise's unfair accusation of being a theft was not based on any evidence of behavior but was likely influenced by racial stereotypes and biases the accuser had, which associate certain ethnicities or skin color with criminality.

Another participant, Josiane, encountered discriminatory remarks in the housing context. The owner, who was an atheist, imposed strict conditions regarding religion. He did not want Josiane or her children to practice their faith while staying in his house. Josiane stated:

“There was a person who lent us his house, and he was an atheist. If there is something that made me suffer the most here in Belgium, it is this house. I lived there with my two boys, and I do not even want to talk about it because it is something that really shocked me. Because we were in his house, he did not want us to talk about God. I said, sir, you did not give us your house to impose this on us and treat us like this, it was your choice. He was part of a “support group for undocumented migrants”. He said to me, we are here to fight people who pray.”

Shortly after this incident, Josiane did not stay longer in that house and was able to get social housing.

Reflecting on Josiane's experience, the support provided by the owner was problematic because it was conditional. She was obliged to deny and hide her religious identity in exchange for staying in the house. This condition clearly shows the owner's intolerance towards the religious beliefs of other people while imposing his own beliefs on them. Moreover, it also highlights the intersectionality of discrimination, as multiple aspects of her identity (religion and migration status) were targets of prejudice.

Gender-based violence:

The intersection of gender and the absence of legal status created levels of vulnerability that left undocumented migrant women exposed to various forms of violence and exploitation. Testimonies of some women I interviewed revealed the harsh experiences they lived or witnessed. Two main topics were highlighted during the conversations: sex trafficking and domestic violence. Doris, one of the participants, talked about her experience with the person who helped her flee her country to escape domestic violence. He expected her to repay the favor by engaging in sex trafficking in Belgium, something she refused to do, which forced her to escape once again.

Nour, another participant, endured seven years of domestic violence by her ex-partner, who took advantage of her undocumented status and made false promises to regularize her situation. Her ex-partner was from Tunisia and had a history of domestic violence against his ex-wife, with whom he had a child. He was able to get legal status through his daughter, who was born in Belgium. He received sole custody because her mother returned to Tunisia due to her complete physical and mental incapacity to take care of her daughter. Nour stated that it was his violence that put the mother in that situation. Nour explained that she felt unable to report the abuse because she was unaware that she could receive protection as an undocumented person. She described some instances of the violence she experienced: She received constant insults, physical abuse, her clothes being burned, and being kicked out of the house late at night. The prolonged abuse severely impacted her health, leading to premature menopause at the age of thirty-three and the development of thyroid problems.

In summary, these experiences of gender-based violence underscored how the undocumented status of the women undermined their ability to seek help or protect themselves. In the case of Nour, the legal advantage of her ex-partner, coupled with Nour's lack of awareness of her rights, created a scenario where he could continue his abusive behavior without being checked. The fear of deportation and exposure to the authorities often silences undocumented migrant women and leaves them in a cycle of unreported abuse.

However, despite the various challenges and vulnerabilities identified in the thematic analysis, the participants also demonstrated resilience and faced these adversities by mobilizing both internal strength and external support.

4.3 Contributing factors to the resilience of undocumented migrant women

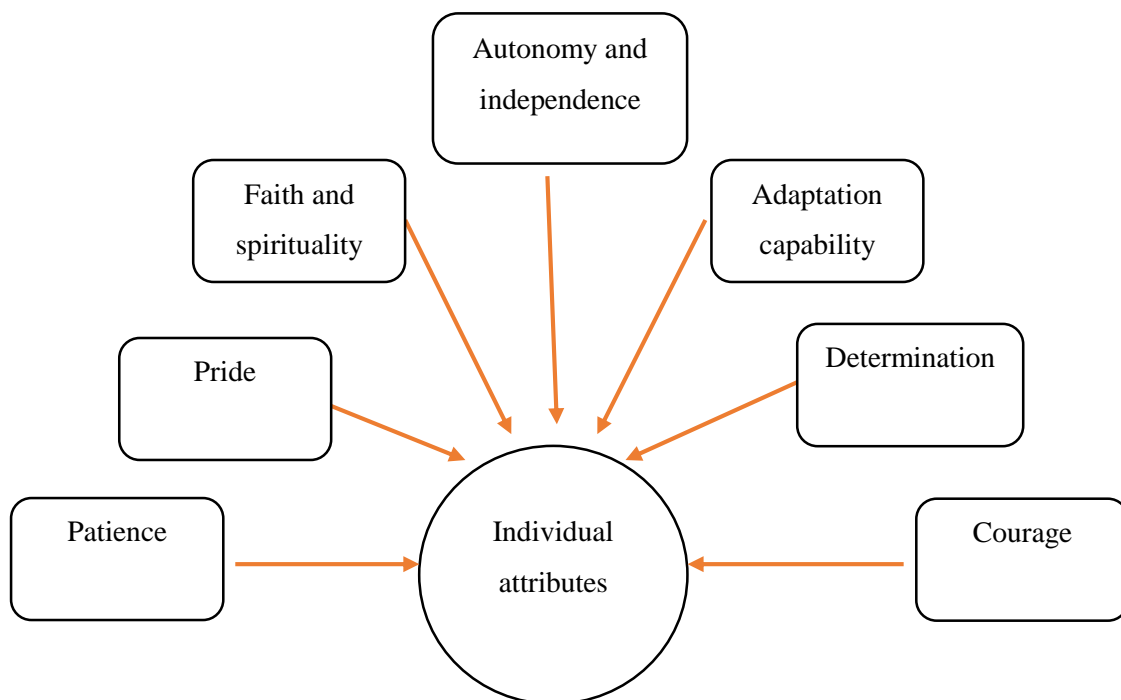
The fieldwork has allowed me to identify several key factors. These factors are categorized into two levels, each playing a significant role in the building process of resilience among undocumented migrant women.

4.3.1 Contributing factors to resilience at the individual level: Two sub-themes emerged from the data: individual attributes and individual initiatives.

4.3.1.1 Individual attributes contributing to resilience:

The participants showed and expressed various individual characteristics that helped them navigate difficult situations. The prevalent attributes that were identified were: adaptation capability, autonomy and independence, and faith and spirituality. Additionally, other characteristics contributed to their resilience as well, such as pride, determination, courage, and patience. In the following section, I will discuss the prevalent attributes.

Figure (2): Individual attributes contributing to resilience



Adaptation capability:

This element emerged as an important characteristic that undocumented women possess. Most of the women I encountered showed the ability to adjust to new and challenging environments. This adjustment incorporated a lot of flexibility, resourcefulness, and the continuous search for alternatives to overcome the legal, social, and economic barriers. Two participants stated in this matter:

"[...] I still know how to adapt easily to what I encounter. There is this versatility."
(Carine)

"I can do lots of things at the same time, [...] I say I can live on ten thousand euros per month as I can live on ten euros per month happily." (Nour)

Moreover, the women I interviewed often could not use the qualifications they had in their country of origin, nor could work in their field of expertise because of their undocumented status. They adapted to these barriers by using other skills they had. For instance, their proficiency in multiple languages mostly African languages allowed them to secure some volunteering positions within associations as translators and interpreters. Skills in cooking, cleaning, and other practical areas were valuable tools as well for them to generate income and adjust according to the available working opportunities.

Faith and spirituality:

The reliance on religious beliefs to cope with challenges represented one of the main elements shared by all the participants, whether it was during the interviews or during our informal discussions. Faith played a central role in their resilience, and prayers were considered a source of comfort and strength for the women, especially during hard times dealing with bureaucratic issues or personal problems. Most participants stated that without their faith, they would not be able to survive the adversities they face in their daily lives:

"My strength is always a prayer. If I see something affecting me, I strain my knees. I implore God, help me." (Ani)

"I do not know, but I still have hope especially since I am a person who prays a lot. That is what relieves me. I swear, I do not know about other women, but really, I can say personally that what helps me a lot is prayer. If I do not pray, I do not know if I am going to get out of it (out of the problem). But otherwise, with prayer, I know that with God, everything is possible." (Josiane)

"I pray to my God, it is he who gives me strength this is my strength, and it is what leads me to make a difference also because, at times, I find myself faced with administrative difficulties, I say to myself perhaps as I am a Christian perhaps it is the Lord who gave me grace precisely to have this and that." (Carine)

Reflecting on the women's statements, it is evident that faith and spirituality are constants in their lives. Most of them use prayers as a coping mechanism to face immediate and daily life difficulties. Most of the women acknowledged having a deep and strong connection with their faith. For instance, Josiane explained that her faith is the reason that she is able to face health challenges as she deals with a chronic disease. Additionally, faith can also be viewed as an important factor for long-term resilience because it gives them hope and motivation to keep going and strive for a better future.

Autonomy and independence:

The data revealed the importance of autonomy and independence in the lives of the participants. Although it may seem contradictory, as undocumented migrants rely on external support in many aspects of their lives, the participants demonstrated either an existing sense of autonomy or a strong aspiration for it. For instance, self-reliance was evident in the testimony of Diara when she talked about her childhood back in her country of origin:

“I started working at a young age. Already at the age of 11, I assisted my mother. I was going to sell for her. So, I grew up with this fighter spirit.”

Diara explained that she has always relied on herself; when there are limitations, she tries to outsmart them and look for alternatives. She expressed having a high level of autonomy because she was put at a young age back in her country of origin in a position where she had to provide for her family by helping her mother at work. Her autonomy and independence were visible also in Belgium, as she sustained herself by cooking and selling her food whenever she could find a space to do so.

Carine further confirmed this spirit of autonomy and independence by referring to how she would rather buy her own food than depend on food parcels provided by solidarity networks, she stated:

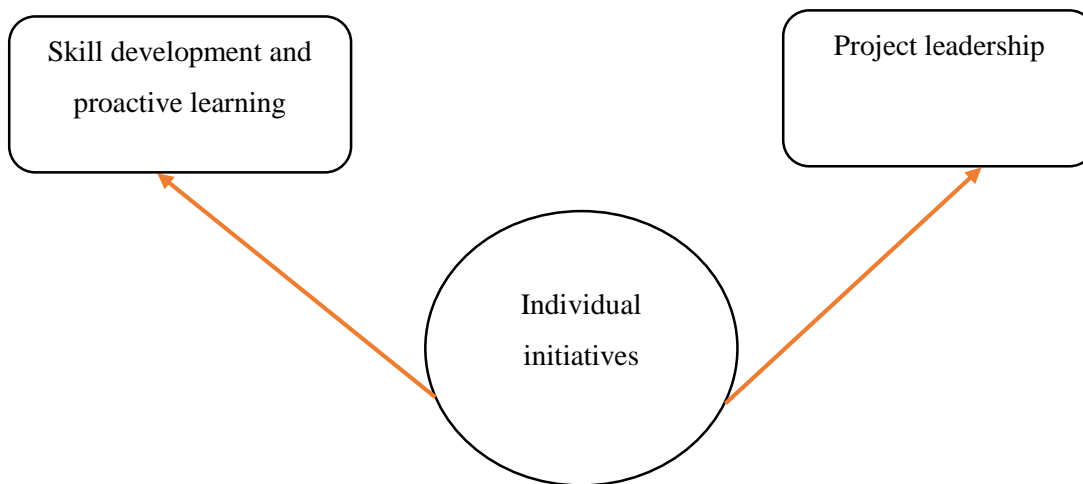
“I prefer to be autonomous than dependent on food parcels because they give me tin cans and I do not eat them, I prefer to be free with my shopping caddie, enter the supermarket, take what I want according to my taste, according to my choice.”

This preference for shaping their own path was a recurring theme observed among the undocumented migrant women I met during my fieldwork. Their autonomy was not just about financial independence; it was also about having the freedom to make their own choices and being less dependent on others' solidarity, despite having many limitations because of their undocumented status.

4.3.1.2 Individual initiatives:

Undocumented migrant women engage in proactive and self-driven activities to improve their lives, assert their autonomy, and enhance their resilience. Individual initiatives include diverse strategies, which can be broadly categorized into two areas:

Figure (3): Forms of individual initiatives



Skill development and proactive learning:

The findings revealed that most participants consider skill development and proactive learning as strategies for integration. Skill development and proactive learning refer to the continuous efforts made by undocumented migrant women to gain new skills and knowledge. This strategy involves active engagement in educational opportunities that are available, such as enrolling in French language classes and acquiring vocational skills (ex. Sewing, cooking). It also includes improving specific abilities or competencies (ex. digital literacy). Most of the participants showed an openness and eagerness to learn new skills, even if it may not secure them a job due to their undocumented status. However, they stated that this commitment had made a significant contribution to their personal growth and development. In this matter, Nour highlighted that her extensive participation in training even made some people question the benefits of such dedication. She explained that her motivation was not to gain money but to have a solid foundation for her future projects once she gets her papers. Carine further emphasized this proactive and self-directed approach to skill development by sharing her experience when she was at the reception center for asylum:

“When we are in a reception center, training is not imposed on us. It is not like an obligation. However, for me, it was an opportunity, as it was part of integration. [...] If one day you will be regularized; you really have to go through this integration process. As a result, I really took advantage of the opportunity at the reception center and did some training. Among other things, I studied international humanitarian law and then I followed citizenship training which will help after we leave the center whether we are recognized as refugees or not.” (Carine)

These two examples showed how undocumented migrant women view skill development and proactive learning as long-term investments that will empower them and set the foundation for future possibilities.

Project leadership:

During my participant observation and interviews, some women stood out as powerful agents because of their entrepreneurial and advocacy leadership. These women participated in and led community projects to address the critical needs of undocumented individuals. For instance, Marie-Louise was one of the founders of the occupation project for undocumented migrants. She assumed responsibilities ranging from finding accommodations to medical care management, she stated:

“We started the movement of “la voix des sans papiers” here in Liege ten years ago. At first, we were looking for other undocumented people to join the movement. Many with whom we started the movement gave up because they did not want to show that they were undocumented. For me, I did not care that I was undocumented as long as the police did not arrest me. If the people know that I am undocumented I do not care, and that is how I took the initiative to launch the occupation movement. [...] We had to find someone who would turn on the water and connect the electricity. During the occupation, I started looking for other undocumented migrants. I would say, when it comes to the cause of undocumented people, I am everywhere, everywhere, going to do some cooking” (Marie-Louise)

Marie-Louise’s testimony shows her personal commitment to the cause of undocumented migrants. She prioritized collective good over personal safety, as she risked exposure. Her initiative not only created a platform for advocacy but also provided some essential services to undocumented individuals, such as housing. Reflecting on Marie-Louise’s experience, it is evident that there is a specificity in project leadership and advocacy in such a context. It does not require only a vision or an idea, but also the capability to handle logistical and administrative challenges.

Carine, on the other hand, was very active in advocating for “the cause of undocumented migrants” in the political arena. She was an investigator in an academic research project addressing violence against undocumented migrant women. She then provided proposals aimed at influencing policies regarding the mechanisms of protection and assistance for undocumented migrant women victims of gender-based violence.

Other participants showed an entrepreneurial mindset. Nour, for example, is currently working on organizing an art exhibition to promote migrant artists who have created work addressing themes related to migration. I noted in this matter:

“During my visit to Nour's home for the interview, we discussed her art gallery project, she was in the process of finding a location for the exhibition. First, she took me to see the exterior of her house, which included a large garden. One part of the garden was reserved for her vegetable patch. For the second part, Nour explained: you see this space, I intend to arrange and clean it so that I can hold a small presentation for the artwork and the artists who will be part of my project. It is a way to promote my project.” (Field note, May 12th, 2024)

Zaynab and Diara have pursued freelance work and are creating their own products (ex. culinary dishes, and necklaces). It is also worth mentioning that other undocumented women I encountered took the initiative or suggested ideas for their own workshops in their area of expertise.

These examples of the individual initiatives undocumented migrant women took represent a form of personal empowerment. By taking control of their situation and creating opportunities for themselves and others, they challenge in some way the stigma and limitations imposed on them.

In addition to the identified internal resources, the participants were able to build resilience by using external resources.

4.3.2 Contributing factors to resilience at the social level

4.3.2.1 Family and friends:

The narratives of the participants showcased that relationships with family and friends were important in fostering resilience. Their roles varied from providing emotional support and encouragement to providing guidance and financial support.

In terms of emotional support, Lylie, for instance, explained how when she received a negative response to her request to renew her resident permit, she felt completely broken, as if a part of her life had been taken away. The first thing she did was call her friend. She then described how her friend was there for her when she was in a vulnerable psychological state, providing comfort and support:

“So, I told him, listen, here is the answer that came out, it is negative. He says to me, where are you, stay there, do not move. Because I was crying and all that, he told me, stay there, do not move. So, he came to get me. It was maybe 6 p.m., and I said to him: Is there any way you can come with me to see my lawyer? I am going to see him. So we went; we rang the bell, but he had already left, unfortunately. I tried to chat a little with my friend, we tried to talk and everything.” (Lylie)

Moreover, family members and friends provided essential financial and material support. For instance, some participants stated that their friends and family members provided them with temporary housing, covered their rent, and helped them with food and other expenses. Nour, for example, explained how

her brother, who was living in the Netherlands, stayed with her in Liège for one year. He helped her with the legal procedure for regularization and paid the rent.

Although the support at the family and friends level was often temporary, it came at crucial moments in the participants' lives when they were facing adversity. This close circle played an important role in uplifting their spirits and motivating them to move forward and not give up.

4.3.2.2 Support from fellow undocumented migrant women:

The main thing that emerged from the data regarding the role of fellow undocumented migrant women is that they frequently served as a source of inspiration for each other. Many participants discussed how women who are also undocumented provided them encouragement and guidance, helping them seek opportunities, stay active, and build a network:

“There was also a lady who was undocumented. She was studying at another school. She was taking sociology classes because she wanted to become a social worker. This is how she strengthened me. She told me: Why do you only spend all your time on small training courses lasting one or two months? Go register here at school, if you have your diploma, it will help you one day.” (Diara)

She also mentioned that undocumented women often gather to exchange information on where to obtain food, training, find accommodations, and access to essential supplies:

“If you need anything, often we have women's meetings, undocumented women. Through our meetings, there is always something like, you have to go to this place, you have to do this, we give help. For example, I did not know that as an undocumented person, I could have access to some training in school (Haute école), until I heard testimonies from other undocumented migrants.” (Diara)

“I follow her¹⁹, she is a spokesperson. I cannot be a spokesperson because I get angry quickly, and it affects me, I remember my life, and it shows even when I speak in public. Not her, she speaks French well and controls her emotions, not me. That is why every time, I follow her. I tell her what are you doing. Like last time, she even managed to get the contact of the minister and I was with her. It helps me when I'm always with Carine because I do not speak. But just the fact that the minister saw me with her is already good.” (Nour)

Reflecting on these testimonies, the support from fellow undocumented migrant women appears to be significant because there is a shared understanding of each other's needs and struggles. Being in the same situation (i.e. not having papers) resonated with these women, motivating them to improve their

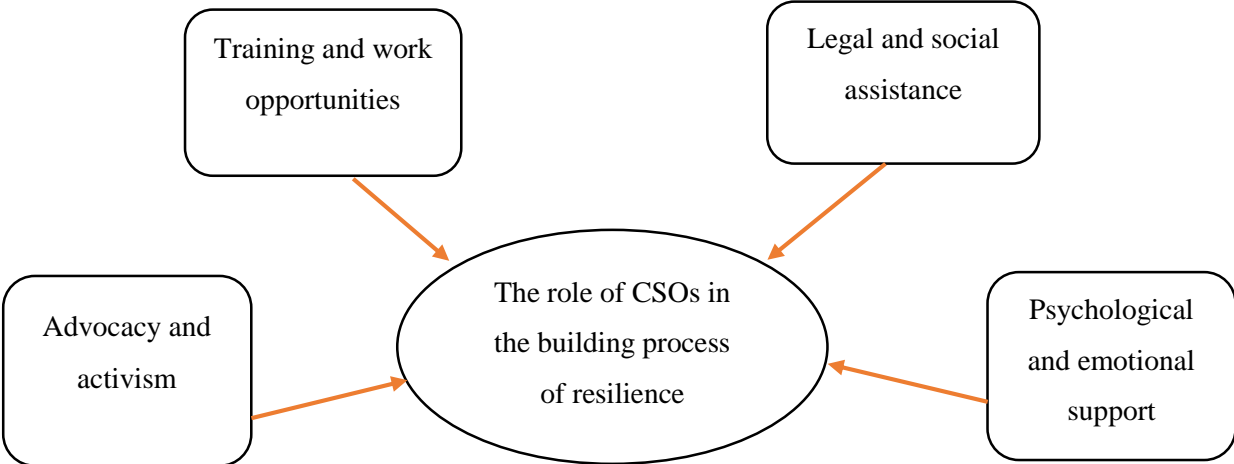
¹⁹ For the context of the conversation, Nour was referring to another participant “Carine”.

circumstances by following the example of other undocumented migrant women who are making progress in their lives.

4.3.2.3 Civil Society Organizations (CSOs):

Civil society organizations emerged as one of the key factors contributing to the resilience of undocumented migrant women. In the context of the current research, CSOs encompass a wide range of non-governmental entities, such as non-profit associations, trade unions, faith-based organizations, and advocacy collectives. These diverse organizations create what I refer to as ‘The associative fabric’. In other words, they represent an interconnected support network that often operates both collectively and individually, providing multifaceted support to undocumented migrants.

Figure (4): Forms of the contribution of CSOs in fostering resilience



Training and work opportunities:

The data revealed that CSOs were considered the main source for providing opportunities for training and employment for undocumented migrant women. In fact, it is worth mentioning that many of the women I encountered during my fieldwork had impressive educational and professional backgrounds. For example, Josiane had a university degree in finance, Lylie pursued a bachelor’s degree in accounting in Belgium, and Zaynab, Nour, and Marie-Louise have all accumulated years of work experience in medical, administrative, and textile fields, respectively, in their country of origin. However, due to the absence of a resident permit, they were unable to use their qualifications in Belgium, which resulted in deep frustration.

This is where CSOs step in as a key factor in developing the resilience of undocumented women. They helped them find alternatives, and restore value to their qualifications and skills, even if they may not

be able to work in their areas of expertise. Through the opportunities provided by the CSOs, many participants expressed gaining a sense of social utility and integration. When Josiane was unable to use her qualifications in finances to secure a job, she started volunteering with associations. She trained to become an interpreter, using her proficiency in five African languages. She has been working as a volunteer interpreter in a CSO for almost six years now, and she enjoys the work because it keeps her active and helps her avoid thinking about her problems. Nour also stated in this matter:

“There (In the association), I found a lot of opportunities. So there is web development; I did web design and also a little graphic design. I enjoyed it, and for me, it is for the future too, for my own project, but also because these skills are in demand. It is also a field that I like because it is linked to creativity, as I am an artist, you can say [...] I was also part of a culinary project, where they saw the capacity of each woman in the culinary field. Through this project, I was able to test my leadership capability, do I have creativity in cooking? Do I manage well my time?” (Nour)

Throughout our conversations, the participants provided a wide range of examples of training and work opportunities they had within the associations. It should be noted that undocumented migrants do not have access to all the activities and training available within the CSOs because most of them require legal status. Thus, I summarize in the following table the training and work opportunities they could have access to:

Table (5): An overview of training and work opportunities provided by CSOs

Training opportunities	Work opportunities (As a volunteer)
<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • French language courses. • Citizenship training. • Translation and interpretation training. • Training in digital professions. • Workshops in: Sewing, cooking, hairdressing, and cleaning. • Entrepreneurship training. 	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Interpreter. • Digital literacy trainer.

Legal and social assistance:

All of the participants acknowledged that, through legal assistance provided by CSOs, they became aware of their rights and duties as undocumented individuals. This awareness helped in anticipating potential critical situations (ex. facing the police, exploitation, assault) with more confidence and assertiveness. Moreover, thanks to lawyers and legal advisors, the participants were guided through complex legal procedures, such as applying for regularization. For instance, three women commented:

“With the associations, there are lawyers too. For example, if you go to (the association)²⁰, you find a lawyer who is there to explain to us our rights and what to do.” (Marie-Louise)

“Here (in the association), I understand and recognize my rights. I acknowledge my rights and responsibilities. Although I have no papers, I am first and foremost a citizen of the world. I know that if I have a problem, I will not be alone. I will have jurists and lawyers who will seek to defend my situation.” (Zaynab)

“I did not know, that if you are an undocumented migrant woman and a victim of domestic violence you can be protected until I met (director of the association)²¹.” (Nour)

In addition to legal aid, CSOs provided social assistance that significantly impacted the daily lives of the participants. Josiane highlighted how the social services at a CSO provided her with housing. Similarly, Carine explained how CSOs helped in finding houses for undocumented people by calling upon local authorities:

“Here in Liege, when you look at the cohesion of the associations, they put pressure on the city, and the city also gets involved. That is how the undocumented people were relocated.”

Moreover, Lylie stated that she furnished her home with donations from a CSO. Ani stated that people who worked in the association helped her when she was struggling financially, ensuring she had access to food and transportation:

“In the (association), (a worker within the association) has helped many people. She gave us the bus ticket. When we had difficult times, she took me to buy a sandwich. Yes. It is difficult, but you are always going to have someone who will help you, give you even 10 euros.” (Ani)

Additionally, CSOs assisted with medical appointments. This support was significant for some women as it eliminated the long waiting time associated with scheduling by phone. In summary, the legal and social assistance provided by CSOs fostered a form of solidarity that contributed to the resilience of undocumented migrant women. This solidarity not only helped with their immediate needs, such as food and housing, but it also empowered them by increasing their awareness of their rights and providing a sense of protection.

²⁰ The participant cited the name of the association, to ensure anonymity, the researcher replaced the name with the word “association”.

²¹ The participant cited the real name of the person, to ensure anonymity, the researcher replaced the name by the work position of the person.

Advocacy and activism:

During the fieldwork, elements of political advocacy were observed. The associative fabric constituted spaces where undocumented migrant women could make their voices heard. These spaces provided a form of visibility that was often absent for undocumented individuals as they avoided exposure and public spaces. By participating in and being supported by CSOs and even citizens who were part of these advocacy efforts, they were placed at the same level as regular citizens who fought for their rights. This form of visibility and collective solidarity also constituted a powerful statement against their marginalization. These collective actions were illustrated in one of the demonstrations²² aimed at closing detention centers for undocumented migrants:

“The march began at Place Saint-Lambert in the city of Liege at 2 pm, and headed towards the detention center of Vottem. The atmosphere was very friendly and cheerful, with a significant presence of the associative networks and citizens. Activists and human rights lawyers delivered speeches, all demanding the closure of detention centers and the regularization of undocumented migrants. As we were heading towards the Vottem closed center, the undocumented people led the march. This visibility echoed their cause. Many came from collectives or associations, and the organization of the march created a protective shield to safeguard them from potential disturbances or police checks. This made the atmosphere less stressful and more safe. Although, there was the presence of the police, their role was to secure the march and no incidents were reported. The participation of undocumented women was also quite important. Some of them came from other cities in Belgium like Brussels. They were the ones giving voice to the march by chanting the demands such as (centre fermés, non, expulsion, non, régularisation, oui)²³. Upon arrival at the Vottem closed center, some of them took the stage and shared their testimonies. They claimed loudly the closure of detention centers for undocumented migrants and the establishment of clear criteria for regularizations.” (field note, April 14th, 2024).

Moreover, Carine explained how her political engagement with the solidarity of various associations is contributing to alleviating the “cause of undocumented migrants”, putting pressure on politicians, and challenging the current migration policies:

²² It was a march to the detention center of Vottem in Liège, Belgium organized by the CRACPE (Collectif de Résistance Aux Centres Pour Etrangers), (Collective of Resistance Against Detention Centers for Foreigners). The claims of the demonstration were centered around the closure of detention centers for migrants besides assessing their rights.

²³ Closed center, no, expulsion, no, regularization, yes [Free translation]

“Yes, being part of the collective as a spokesperson is that in every political meeting that I had, it gave me strength. The people I met, such as representatives of the city, we are currently working on the “single work permit” in order to put in place the possibility of obtaining regularization through work. Even if there is no guarantee [...] there is a big difference when associations are involved. The cohesion of associations is very important because it really produces results. [...] I think it is the associations that are putting pressure on the policy. [...], that is why you see that the politicians are also moving. Politicians need associations that, precisely act as a bridge between us, them (the politicians), and us because at times they do not know how to address us directly. They go through associations.”

Carine further explained that there were differences between the cities. For her, the spirit of solidarity and cohesion is much more present in Liege than in Brussels. For example, the proximity that the Liege associative fabric has with politicians allowed her to meet representatives of the city, and to attend discussions concerning the question of "the single work permit" as a possibility for regularization. She emphasized that this inclusion of undocumented people in the interaction between local government and associations allowed undocumented migrants to speak for themselves and make their claims heard.

In summary, by being considered active and key actors in advocacy actions, undocumented migrant women gained recognition and agency over the discourse surrounding their issues. The associative network, which facilitated advocacy efforts, provided a public platform where undocumented women could contribute to positive change for themselves.

Psychological and emotional support:

Most of the participants highlighted the positive impact of association membership on their psychological state. The associative environment offered a temporary distraction that helped the women forget about their difficult situation. They described these spaces as sources of joy and relaxation. The main contributing factor to this positive sentiment is the way workers within the associations treated them with compassion and kindness without any form of judgment. Lylie stated in this matter:

“What I often say to (The director of the association). When I come here, there is joy. I do not know, maybe she does it without knowing it, but she gives people a smile, comfort, and everything. I feel good here (in the association). She gave me joy and every time I am here, honestly, I laugh and smile. [...] In fact, you feel like you are forgetting your situation. I forget. I totally forget. Sometimes I even forget that I am undocumented.”

Additionally, associations allowed the participants to get out of their social isolation. Most of them said that coming to the associations and participating in various workshops and activities played a role in

enhancing their sociability. It allowed them to meet new people with different backgrounds, share their experiences, build friendships, and expand their networks. For instance, two participants asserted:

“For me, what is important in (The sewing workshop), you also know that we do not gain anything (financially). It is not the money that brings us here. For example, it takes me almost two hours to get here. To say that you can do a month without even earning 20 euros. So if you take the time, if you take the transport, all that. For me, it is to be with others, to exchange ideas, to go out, to have contacts.” (Josiane)

“Discover (new people) that is it. Because we were not just Tunisians, we were from Tunisia, Morocco, Russia, Chechen, and also Congolese. So, there is this great diversity.” (Nour)

In summary, CSOs provided safe spaces for undocumented migrant women where they felt accepted and included in society. These welcoming environments improved their mental health and increased their emotional resilience.

However, it should be noted that some participants felt that certain CSOs used their precarious situation for the benefit of the organization rather than addressing their genuine needs. For example, Nour stated that she often went to this one CSO in order to receive food parcels. She felt that they were using her status to showcase their charitable image. She also felt mistreated when she was receiving the food parcels:

“One time, when I was receiving the food parcels, one of the employees at the association started yelling in front of everyone, saying oh you are the one without papers [...]” (Nour)

Lylie, another participant, also mentioned that she has limited interaction with CSOs because she has this fear of being instrumentalized, besides feeling uncomfortable with some of them.

Although these incidents were not very common, they raise some ethical concerns in terms of the conduct some CSOs have and how they could potentially exploit the people they are supposed to provide support to. These practices can undermine the trust and safety of undocumented migrant women. While CSOs can be powerful allies in enhancing the resilience of these women, this duality of women's experiences highlights the need for CSOs to critically reflect on some of their practices if they result in any form of prejudice. The primary focus of CSOs should be on the genuine help and well-being of the people they support, rather than on their organizational benefits.

4.4 Aspirations and future goals

In the current research, the data analysis revealed that most participants did not consider their aspirations and future goals solely as an endpoint but also as a driver that further enhanced their resilience. For instance, most participants engaged in various training and volunteer work as part of their efforts to

potentially achieve regularization. This goal emerged as one of the main aspirations undocumented migrant women aim to attain. For them, having a legal stay in Belgium means getting out of uncertainty and fear, gaining the opportunity to lead a normal life, and planning for the future. Many have expressed having projects and dreams that cannot be achieved without legal status. Therefore, they consider regularization as their primary goal, which will allow them to utilize their full potential.

Moreover, aspirations for independence and autonomy were expressed by some participants, as it was highlighted by Zaynab:

“I just want to be independent I do not want to depend on anyone, because I have always been independent since my childhood. I do not like depending on someone. If they do not want to give me the papers that is fine, but at least to have a work permit to be able to work. I want my autonomy.”

Further, other participants expressed the need for stability, such as having a house in Belgium and a feeling of belonging. For instance, Josiane, who lived a nomadic life as she was born in Burundi, became a refugee in Rwanda and pursued her studies in Congo, stated:

“I would like to achieve something, it is to stay in Belgium, to live in Belgium, as my home country. I do not mind living abroad [...]. Now I need stability because I was born a nomad until today.”

Moreover, Nour shared her desire to become a businesswoman once she gets her papers:

“Here, I am talking to you as someone who has her papers, I want to finish the current project of “Art exhibition”, but I also have another dream, although, I cannot do both because it is also a big project is to one day create my own clothing line. “

Another interesting finding was the commitment of some participants to continue the fight for “the cause of undocumented migrants” even if they get their papers. Two women stated in this matter:

“For me in the future, I hope to get my papers, so that I can resume my profession (being a nurse). But even if I have my papers, I will not abandon the undocumented people; I will continue. Maybe if I start working, I will not have a lot of free time, but I will never forget the undocumented individuals. There will always be people who will be undocumented, so I will always fight for the cause of undocumented people.” Marie-Louise

“So the project for the future is to continue to campaign (for the cause of undocumented migrants) to ensure that our rights are respected, to live in solidarity.” Carine

Throughout our conversations, the various aspirations and future goals of the undocumented women reflected the desire not only to secure their own futures but also to have a positive impact on society. Their objectives are often connected with becoming productive members by pursuing careers that align

with their skills and passion, but also promoting social justice by actively engaging in advocacy for the rights of undocumented people.

4.5 Analysis of the emerging themes according to the socio-ecological framework

The analysis of the interviews and field notes from observations allowed for the identification of the key elements in the building process of resilience among undocumented migrant women. To conclude this chapter, I will present a socio-ecological interpretation that will illustrate how these elements operate and where they are situated within a multidimensional structure.

It incorporates the ecological model of human development by Bronfenbrenner (1979), the socio-ecological interpretation of resilience by Ungar (2015), and Qamar's (2023) conceptualization of resilience within the context of migration that was previously discussed in the theoretical framework. According to Bronfenbrenner's (1979) ecological systems model, a number of interrelated environmental systems influence an individual's development: The microsystem (immediate environment), the mesosystem (interaction and relationships between various aspects of the microsystem), the exosystem (ex. External structures), The macrosystem (ex. values, legal system, policies), and the chronosystem (the dimension of time). Moreover, Ungar (2015) provides an understanding of resilience that includes the interaction between the individual and its multi-level socio-ecological systems. In this interaction, the person's strengths, challenges, and available opportunities within those systems are taken into consideration. As a final element of reference, Qamar's (2023) conceptualization of resilience within the context of migration. He advanced four elements that influence and shape the ability of migrants to be resilient: status (immigration and employment status), access to resources, support, and visibility. It should be noted that the interaction between these four elements emerged across the findings presented earlier in this chapter.

The data analysis revealed that the building process of resilience among undocumented migrant women includes elements that operate in three interconnected socio-ecological systems: the microsystem, the exosystem, and the macrosystem. The mesosystem can be viewed as an intermediate level that acknowledges the interaction between different elements of the microsystem.

The microsystem includes the immediate environment where undocumented migrant women interact, as well as aspects that are related to the individual level. In this system, elements of contributing factors to resilience on the individual level (ex. individual attributes) are included. Aspirations are also part of the microsystem, as they are directly connected to each woman who participated in the research.

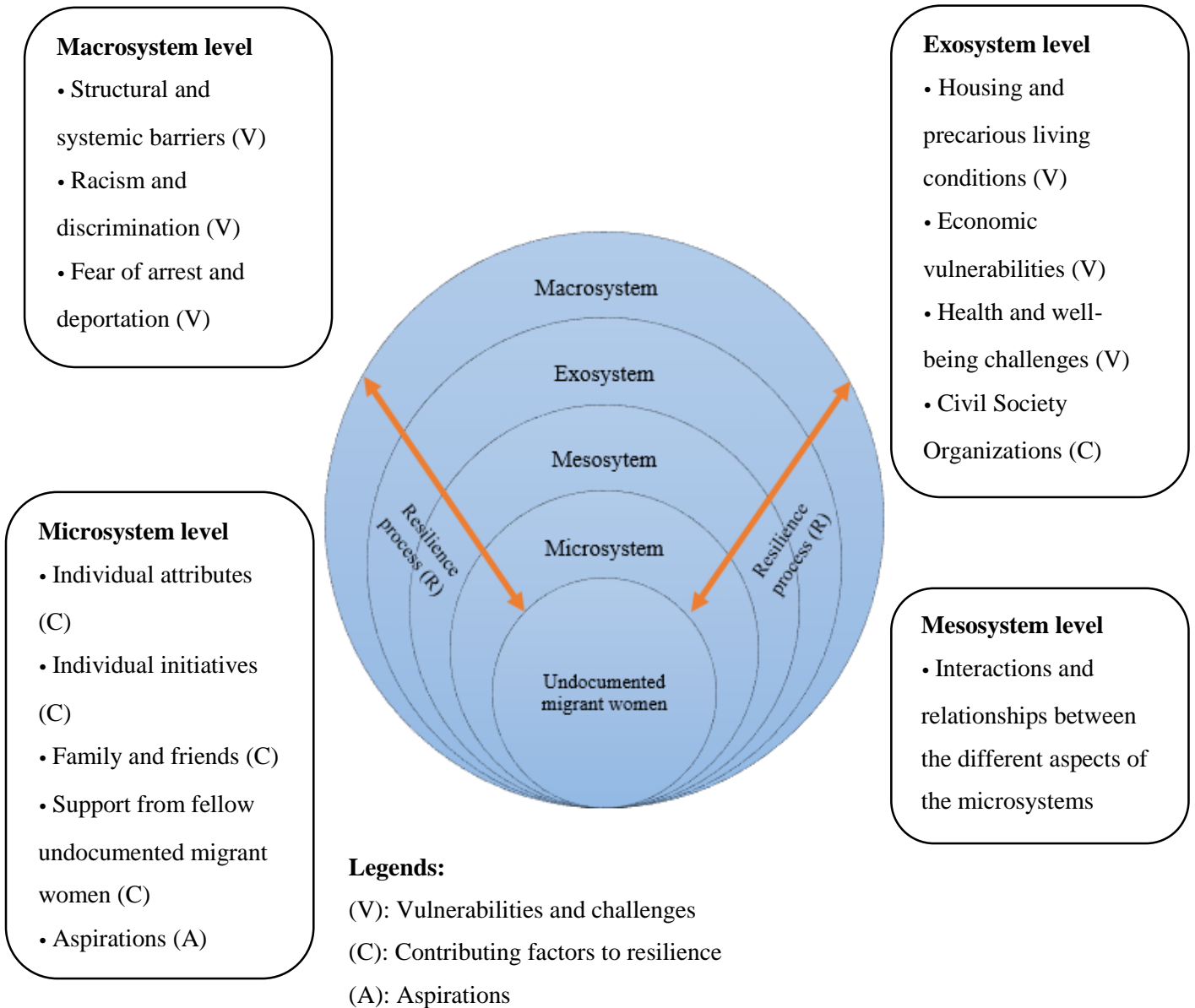
The exosystem refers to external elements that are not included in the immediate environment of undocumented migrant women but have an impact on their lives. This level includes, for instance: CSOs as a contributing factor to resilience; challenges such as housing and precarious living conditions are

also found in this external environment in which undocumented migrant women operate. It is within this system that most of the challenges and vulnerabilities are situated.

Finally, the macrosystem includes elements such as structural and systemic barriers, racism and discrimination, and fear of arrest and deportation. According to the socio-ecological model, these elements relate to the overall political and legal framework, institutional practices, and societal attitudes. In comparison to the exosystem, which includes most of the challenges, the macrosystem presents challenges with a higher impact on the lives of undocumented migrant women. The possibility of overcoming uncertainty and irregularity depends largely on systemic and institutional approaches to migration. In fact, the systemic barriers to regularization discussed earlier in this chapter provided evidence of how the macrosystem shapes and determines the potential change in the legal situation of undocumented migrant women as well as their overall resilience.

Therefore, this analysis reveals that undocumented migrant women interact and move within various levels of the socio-ecological environment, encountering elements that enhance resilience as well as barriers and challenges that can compromise their resilience, particularly in the macrosystem. Figure (5) below shows the localization of each element within the various socio-ecological systems.

Figure (5): Positioning of the emerging themes within the socio-ecological systems



5. Discussion and conclusion

In this concluding chapter, I will present a summary of the key findings and their relevance to the research questions and objectives. This includes examining how the results align or contrast with the existing literature. I will then discuss the broader implications of this work, highlighting how it can contribute to the improvement of the lives of undocumented migrant women. Then, I will critically evaluate the limitations of the current research. Finally, I will propose avenues for future studies to address the identified limitations.

First, this study was structured around the aim of understanding how undocumented migrant women develop resilience despite the challenges they face. To investigate this process, the research was guided by four key questions. These questions aimed at identifying the challenges and vulnerabilities experienced by undocumented migrant women, the contributing factors to resilience both at the individual and social level, and their aspirations.

Several key findings were identified when addressing the study's research questions. One of the main elements that emerged from the data regarding intersecting vulnerabilities and challenges was the structural and systemic barriers to regularization. These challenges subscribe to the concept of the production of irregularity, as advanced by Engbersen & Leun (2001), Düvell (2011), and Gonzales et al. (2019). The prolonged period of waiting and the high rejection rate of regularization applications showed how state policies and practices contributed to creating and maintaining irregularity. The struggle to receive a response for regularization showed that the absence of a defined time limit for these procedures leaves individuals in a prolonged state of uncertainty and irregularity, contributing to their increased vulnerability. For instance, the experience of one of the participants with the impossibility of renewing her student resident permit despite providing the recommended documents shows that irregularity is intentionally shaped by state policies rather than resulting from individuals' neglect of migration laws (Schweitzer, 2017).

Moreover, the intersection of gender, race, and absence of legal status led to the emergence of specific and higher levels of vulnerability among racialized undocumented migrant women. For instance, some women's narratives showcased the use of racial slurs like "macaques" in public transportation. Although intersectionality between the absence of legal status and race may not be immediately visible in this context, the undocumented status led some participants to rather ignore the incident than report it for fear of facing the police. This demonstrates the "matrix of domination" as articulated by Andersen and Collins (2001), where the intersection of the women's undocumented status and their race led to the suppression of their agency. While direct racial insults were not reported by most of the participants, other forms of racism and discrimination were prevalent. A significant finding regarding the intersection of race and the assumption of criminality emerged as a participant was accused unjustly of stealing from

a crowded bus based on her appearance. This reflects the stereotypes put on certain ethnic and racial minorities.

Additionally, the intersection of gender and the absence of legal status also exposed undocumented migrant women to specific vulnerabilities, such as attempts of sex trafficking and domestic violence. Both perpetrators exploited the women's undocumented status and gender to exert power and abuse. These instances are consistent with Crenshaw's (1991) framework of intersectionality, which argues that multiple factors intersect to amplify the vulnerabilities faced by marginalized individuals and that these factors should be taken into consideration all at once and not separately.

Instrumentalization by CSOs was an unexpected finding in this research. Although the positive aspects of CSOs were present and will be discussed later in this chapter, the findings showed that CSOs can also contribute to undocumented women's vulnerabilities. Instances of instrumentalization by CSOs were reported by a few participants who felt that, for example, their precarious situation of being undocumented was used to showcase the charitable action without considering their feelings in the process.

Moving on to the contributing factors of resilience at the individual level. In terms of individual attributes contributing to the resilience of undocumented migrant women, faith and spirituality were essential components of the participants' resilience. All the participants acknowledged the reliance on religious beliefs to cope with the challenges, with many women considering prayer as a source of comfort and strength. This finding aligns with Lusk et al (2019) study, which showed how forced migrants exhibited a higher level of resilience and well-being because of their strong connection to their faith despite their exposure to deep trauma and considerable adversities. Moreover, the identification of faith-based strategies for resilience, such as courageous hope (Cruz, 2006) was also highlighted in participants' experiences, who stated that their faith was the reason they maintained hope and aspired for a better future.

Furthermore, the expression of agency was another significant finding in the current research. The data showed various forms of agency among undocumented migrant women, such as entrepreneurial and advocacy leadership. Advocacy was illustrated through the involvement in founding the occupation project and efforts to improve the protection mechanisms of undocumented migrant women victims of gender-based violence. This political engagement reflects Chimienti & Solomos' (2011) observation of the "Sans-papier movement" where undocumented migrants occupied public spaces through various actions to advocate for their rights. However, the interesting aspect of the expressed agency among the participants was its versatility, as it was not limited to specific spaces or domains. The participants inserted themselves into various contexts to perform their agency. They showcased forms of self-reliance through culinary arts, jewelry-making, and artistic projects. Some of these forms of agency were also addressed in previous research (Reinhard & Schweitzer, 2017; Clarebout & Mescoli, 2023).

At the social level, CSOs stand out as one of the key supporting systems undocumented migrant women rely on to overcome various barriers and challenges they encounter in their daily lives, including limited access to health care, education, employment, and social services. The literature pointed out the importance of a favorable social environment in encouraging resilient actions. Specifically, building a social network, economic resources, and legal and social assistance were considered foundational external elements of resilience (Dagdeviren et al, 2016; MacKinnon & Derickson, 2013). The findings provided evidence that CSOs offer these critical resources. However, an interesting aspect emerged that showed that the contribution of CSOs goes beyond the various services and training opportunities they offer. Emotional support was an important element that undocumented migrant women found in the associative environment as well. CSOs reduced their isolation, gave them spaces to express themselves, and provided them with a sense of belonging while improving their overall well-being.

Additionally, one interesting factor emerged from the data: support from fellow undocumented migrant women. This support played a significant role in enhancing the resilience of other undocumented women. The participants highlighted how fellow undocumented migrant women gave them guidance, encouragement, and practical advice. They were viewed by some of them as a source of inspiration and motivation that helped with finding spaces where opportunities are available. This resonates with the literature on social capital and support systems and their contributions to building resilience among undocumented migrant women (Van der Ham, 2014; Rashid & Gregory, 2014).

Moreover, aspirations played a dual role in the building process of resilience. For most participants, it served as a source of motivation. However, they also acknowledged that it may not be possible to achieve those aspirations without first gaining a legal stay in Belgium.

Overall, the multilevel analysis applied in this study revealed that the resilience process among undocumented migrant women requires combining internal resources, individual initiatives, and external resources available in their social environment. Despite their undocumented status, the women exercised agency and autonomy. They used their strength and skills to insert themselves in spaces where they could be active agents in society, by engaging, for instance, in proactive learning, culinary art, and entrepreneurship. However, their legal status imposes many constraints on them, such as having access to educational opportunities, housing, work, and other essential services. Therefore, they still rely heavily on external support (ex. CSOs).

Moreover, the applied socio-ecological approach provided an identification of areas of strength and weakness in the building process of resilience among undocumented migrant women. Areas of strength are illustrated through the various enablers of resilience, while areas of weakness are illustrated through the various barriers and challenges.

Thus, to address these obstacles to resilience, the researcher suggests that potential interventions could occur at the macrosystem level, where systemic and structural barriers considerably compromise the

resilience of undocumented migrant women. The current regularization procedures need to be critically reviewed. A reduction in the period of waiting and the establishment of clear and inclusive criteria for regularization is recommended. Furthermore, interventions could also occur on the existing institutional mechanisms designed to address the issue of undocumented migrant women victims of gender-based violence. Specific measures must be implemented for them to ensure they feel safe seeking support despite their irregular status.

A significant social implication of this research is the need to shift narratives and reduce the stigma surrounding undocumented migrants. In fact, the dominant narratives often portray undocumented migrants as a burden or a threat. However, the focus of this study and the findings suggest that undocumented migrant women have remarkable levels of resilience. They are proactive individuals who seek any opportunity presented to them to contribute positively to society despite the various adversities they face. Their stories of resilience, aspirations, and achievements should be highlighted more often in public discourse and academia to change public perceptions and challenge current exclusionary migration policies.

That being said, it is prudent to consider that the current research also has its limitations, as previously discussed in the methodology chapter. One limitation is the sample size and its regional specificity. Given all the participants were located in the province of Liege in Belgium, the findings may specifically reflect on the resilience experiences of undocumented migrant women living in that region.

To address this limitation of the current study, the researcher recommends the use of the socioecological perspective in investigating resilience among undocumented migrant women, but with a larger sample and more diverse profiles in terms of geographical location and background. This diversity will allow for a deeper identification of potential similarities and differences. For instance, comparative studies of the resilience of undocumented migrant women in different geographical locations (ex. cities, regions, countries). This approach can help explore the potential impact of the geographical context on the level of access to resources and support networks and, consequently, its impact on the development of resilience.

Additionally, longitudinal studies are needed to track the development of resilience across various stages of undocumented migrant women's lives, including the pre-migratory and post-migratory journeys. This will allow for the identification of the long-term effects of environmental factors such as migration policies and societal norms. By integrating "time" as an analytical tool, researchers will not only investigate long-term effects but also design sustainable solutions to the evolving challenges faced by undocumented migrant women.

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7. Appendix

The interviews were conducted in three languages (English, French, and Arabic). Thus, I will present the three versions. It should be noted that additional questions were added to some participants to accommodate their responses and the flow of the conversations. Nevertheless, the thematic framework of the research was maintained throughout the process.

7.1 English version of the interview guide

Introduction:

First of all, thank you for agreeing to participate in this research. I would like to start by giving a brief overview of my thesis topic. I am working on the resilience processes among undocumented women in Belgium. By resilience, I refer to the ability to overcome and deal with different obstacles and problems encountered. My approach is to identify how undocumented women demonstrate their resilience.

I want to emphasize that your testimony will be used solely for my thesis, and your identity will be protected by using pseudonyms. Secondly, your participation is voluntary and you are free to withdraw at any moment.

That being said, before we begin our discussion, do you have any questions?

- Please do present yourselves. Where are you from, and how long have you been here in Belgium?
- What were the reasons for leaving your country (reasons for migration)?
- What did you do in your country of origin? And what is your educational and professional background?
- When you first arrived in Belgium, what was your experience as a newcomer?
- Did you have any knowledge of the procedures to follow?
- Have you faced any particular problems upon your arrival?

Let's move on to the second part of the conversation, where we will be talking about the obstacles and challenges you encountered as an undocumented migrant woman.

- Could you tell me what major difficulties you have in terms of accessing health care, the job market, housing, and training and education?
- Have you experienced any kind of discrimination or prejudice? If so, what were the reasons for this prejudice?

Now, we are going to discuss your strength and resilience.

- How do you cope with the difficulties you encounter in your daily life?
- In the third part of this conversation, we will discuss your strengths and resilience.
- How do you cope with the difficulties you encounter in your daily life? And where do you find the strength to keep going?
- Can you describe the personal traits that have helped you overcome these difficulties?
- What individual initiative have you taken to stay socially active?
- What contribution has the associative network played in your resilience process and in giving you the strength to face adversities?
- Can you give concrete examples of the different opportunities you have had through associations?
- Are there other factors or people that also helped you?

For the last part of our conversation, I'd like to talk about your aspirations.

- Do you have any future dreams or goals you'd like to achieve?
- Is there anything else you would like to share?

7.2 French version of the interview guide

Introduction :

Tout d'abord, je vous remercie d'avoir accepté de participer à cette recherche. J'aimerais commencer par donner un bref aperçu de mon sujet de thèse. Je travaille sur les processus de résilience parmi les femmes sans-papiers en Belgique. Par résilience, je fais référence à la capacité de surmonter et de faire face aux différents obstacles et problèmes rencontrés. Mon approche consiste à identifier comment les femmes sans-papiers illustrent et développent leur résilience.

Je tiens à souligner que votre témoignage seront utilisés uniquement dans le cadre de ma thèse et que votre identité sera protégée par l'utilisation de pseudonymes. Deuxièmement, votre participation est volontaire et vous êtes libre de vous retirer à tout moment.

Ceci étant dit, avant de commencer notre discussion, avez-vous des questions ?

Tout d'abord, je vous laisse vous présenter, de quelle pays venez-vous, et depuis combien de temps êtes-vous en Belgique ?

- Quelles sont les raisons qui vous ont poussé à quitter votre pays ?
- Que faisiez-vous dans votre pays d'origine ? quelles parcours avez-vous eu professionnelle et en terme d'étude ?
- Lorsque vous êtes arrivé en Belgique, quelle a été votre expérience en tant que nouvelle arrivante ?
- Avez-vous connaissance des procédures à suivre ?
- Avez-vous rencontré des problèmes particuliers lors de votre arrivée ?

Passons à la deuxième partie de la conversation, où nous allons parler des obstacles et des défis que vous avez rencontrés en tant que femme migrante sans papiers.

- Pourriez-vous me dire quelles sont les principales difficultés que vous rencontrez en termes d'accès aux soins de santé, marché du travail, logement, à la formation et à l'éducation ?
- Avez-vous été victime d'une forme quelconque de discrimination ou de préjudice ? Si oui, quelles ont été les raisons de ces discriminations ?
- Nous allons maintenant parler de votre force et de votre résilience
- Comment faites-vous face aux difficultés que vous rencontrez dans votre vie quotidienne ? Où trouvez-vous la force pour continuer à avancer ?
- Pouvez-vous décrire les traits de caractère qui vous ont aidé à surmonter ces difficultés ?

- Aviez-vous entrepris des initiatives individuelles pour rester socialement actif ? Si oui, pouvez-vous me donner des exemples ?
- Quelle rôle le réseau associatif a-t-il joué dans votre processus de résilience ?
- Pouvez-vous donner des exemples concrets des différentes opportunités que vous avez eues grâce aux associations ?
- Y a-t-il d'autres facteurs ou personnes qui vous ont également aidé à surmonter les obstacles et les difficultés ?

Pour la dernière partie de notre conversation, j'aimerais qu'on parle de vos aspirations

- Avez-vous des rêves ou des objectifs futurs que vous souhaitez atteindre ?
- Souhaitez-vous rajouter autre chose ?

7.3 Arabic version of the interview guide

مقدمة :

أولا أريد أن أشكرك على قبول المشاركة في هذا البحث العلمي. أريد أن أبدأ بتقديم لمحة قصيرة على موضوع الأطروحة. تدور الدراسة حول معرفة اليات الصمود و المرونة لدى النساء المهاجرات بدون أوراق في بلجيكا. أريد من خلال هذه الورقة البحثية معرفة كيف تتجسد مظاهر تلك المرونة و كيف تستطيع النساء المهاجرات بدون أوراق التغلب و مواجهة مختلف العقبات.

أريد أن أذكر فقط أن المعلومات التي سنشاركها معها ستستخدم فقط في اطار الأطروحة، و أنه لن يتم الافصاح عن هويتك بحيث سيتم استبدال اسمك باسم مستعار، اضافة الى هذا، تبقى مشاركتك طوعية و لك الحرية المطلقة في الانسحاب في أي وقت. قبل أن نبدأ الحوار، هل لديك أسئلة؟

أولا، خليك تقدمي نفسك، من أي بلد انتي؟ و كم صار لك و أنتي في بلجيكا؟

- عندما وصلت الى بلجيكا، كيف كانت تجربتك كوافدة جديدة؟
- هل كانت عندك دراية بالاجراءات الواجب اتحاذها
- هل واجهت أية مشاكل معينة في الفترات الأولى من مجيئك الى بلجيكا؟
- ماذا كنت تعمل في بلدك الأصلي؟ ما هو المسار الوظيفي والدراسي الذي اتبعته؟
- عندما وصلت إلى بلجيكا، كيف كانت تجربتك كوافد جديد؟
- هل كنت على دراية بالاجراءات الواجب اتباعها؟
- هل واجهت أي مشاكل معينة عند وصولك؟

خلينا ننقل الى الجزء الثاني من الحوار، أين سنتحدث عن العقبات و التحديات التي واجهتها كامرأة مهاجرة بدون أوراق

- هل يمكن أن تحدثيني عن الصعوبات الرئيسية التي تواجهينها للحصول على الرعاية الصحية، الولوج الى سوق العمل، الحصول على السكن، التدريب والتعليم؟
- هل كنت ضحية لأي شكل من أشكال التمييز ؟ إذا كان الأمر كذلك، فماذا كانت أسباب هذا التمييز؟
- سنتحدث الآن عن قوتك ومرونتك
- كيف تتعاملين مع الصعوبات التي تواجهينها في حياتك اليومية؟ من أين تستمدين القوة للاستمرار؟
- هل يمكنك وصف السمات الشخصية التي ساعدتك في التغلب على هذه الصعوبات؟
- هل اتخذت أي مبادرات فردية لكي تبقى نشيطة اجتماعيا ؟ إذا كان الأمر كذلك، هل يمكنك أن تعطيني بعض الأمثلة؟
- كيف ساهمت الجمعيات غير الربحية في مساعدك على الصمود و تجاوز العقبات؟
- هل يمكنك إعطاء أمثلة ملموسة عن الفرص المختلفة التي أتاحت لك بفضل المنظمات غير الربحية؟
- هل هناك عوامل أو أشخاص آخرون ساعدوك أيضاً في التغلب على العقبات والصعوبات؟

بالنسبة للجزء الأخير من حديثنا، أود أن أتحدث عن تطلعاتك

- هل لديك أي أحلام أو أهداف مستقبلية ترغبين في تحقيقها؟
- هل هناك أي شيء آخر تودين مشاركته؟