



EVENT REPORT

EMPOWER, PROTECT, REPRESENT: ELIMINATING BARRIERS FOR MIGRANT WOMEN IN POLITICS

Multiplier event held on 21 November 2024

BY WIDE+

THE WE-EMPOWER PROJECT



WE-EMPOWER is a 2.5-year transnational collaboration that aims at empowering migrant women and gender non-conforming persons, to actively participate in civic and democratic life in Europe. Commencing in April 2022, the project unites seven women-led and migrant women-led organisations across Europe with a shared mission to protect migrant women's rights.

It is co-funded by the European Union's ERASMUS+ programme. Key outcomes of WE-EMPOWER include a study and a survey on migrant women's democratic participation in several European countries, an online toolkit and resource kit, and a treasure box of educational materials to promote engagement. Activities to achieve these results include international trainings, project meetings, and multiplier events, both in-person and online, designed to disseminate our findings and tools widely.

WE-EMPOWER Partner Organisations



Supporting Organisations for this Event



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EVENT SUMMARY

On 21 November 2024, WIDE+, in partnership with the Collectif des Femmes and Chaska, hosted the event: **“Empower, Protect, Represent: Eliminating Barriers for Migrant Women in Politics”**, to further discuss the outcomes of the WE-EMPOWER project. This event highlighted the closing of the 2.5-year transnational initiative that empowered migrant women, including gender non-conforming individuals, to actively engage in civic and democratic life across Europe.

The event centred on the critical underrepresentation of migrant women in politics, a key theme that ran not only throughout the discussion but has been a common conclusion of the whole WE-EMPOWER project. Specific to this event was the **intersection of political exclusion with gender-based violence, a pervasive barrier that continues to limit migrant women’s participation in political life**. By hosting the event ahead of the International Day for the Elimination of Violence Against Women, the organisers sought to draw attention to the disproportionate impact of gender-based violence, both online and offline, on women from migrant and racialised backgrounds, which often deters them from pursuing political careers. The event aimed to raise awareness of this systemic issue, stressing the urgent need for targeted interventions to create safer and more inclusive political spaces. A final objective of the event was to **inspire collaboration, generate actionable recommendations, and advocate for the empowerment and protection of migrant women**, ensuring that their voices are heard and represented in political decision-making.

With **25 attendees from various civil society organisations** present at the event, **Tamara Ibarrola (she/her) from Chaska** opened the event in Brussels, setting the tone for the rest of the proceedings.

WIDE+ board member Cristina Reyna (she/her) then introduced the history and work of WIDE+ to the audience presenting WIDE+’s vision in her opening words, which is *“to create a society that actively opposes discrimination, focusing on marginalised groups like women, migrants, indigenous and LGBTQI+ individuals. Mere inclusion is insufficient. We aim for a*

profound societal transformation by dismantling unjust structures across economic, environment, social, sexual, racial, generational and ethic dimensions.”

This broader vision shapes the work of WIDE+ as well as the WE-EMPOWER project which has been the fruit of the gender and migration working group at WIDE+.

The event served as **a key moment to wrap up the WE-EMPOWER project by showcasing its results and sharing insights and findings**. Cristina emphasizes how this project -- and in general WIDE+ -- aims to gather and foster exchange between the experiences, knowledge and specialities of the project partners from across Europe, opening the topics and focus on the event of the day and of the panel discussion that followed: women in politics, representation of migrant women in politics both at local, national and European level, as well as the structural intersectional discriminations faced by migrant women.

The panel discussion was moderated by WIDE+ Programme Coordinator, Emma Rainey (she/her). The panellists included Shada Islam (she/her), an EU Affairs Commentator and Founder of the New Horizons Project; Lailuma Sadid (she/her), a Journalist, Research Assistant at ULB, Founder of NADOE, and former EU election candidate; and Cecilia Torres (she/her), Municipal Councillor for the ECOLO Party in Ottignies-Louvain-la-Neuve and Founder of Collectif des Femmes.

The panel provided valuable insights on the challenges and opportunities for migrant women in politics, fostering a thought-provoking exchange among experts and attendees. The event concluded with remarks from Amancay Egastorres (she/her), Deputy Director of Collectif des Femmes, who summarised the key takeaways from the panel discussion.

The event took place from 10:00 to 12:00 at Amazone Maison with French and English interpretation services. Following the discussion, a light lunch was provided with an opportunity to network.

Lastly, **the event was closed by Amancay Egastorres (she/her) from Collectif des Femmes** – which recently celebrated their 45th anniversary in 2025. In her closing remarks,

Amancave touched upon the intersectional layers behind the reality of being a migrant woman navigating politics, work, parenthood, the patriarchal society as a whole before finishing up with a motivational message for migrant women to actively engage in civil society and politics.

This report captures the insights expressed by the different panellists, as well as key points raised during discussions with the audience. The content has been **organised into overarching cross-cutting themes to provide a structured overview of the main ideas and concerns.**

Furthermore, a series of recommendations, derived directly from the discussions, has been compiled to inform future actions and decision-making processes.



On the right, Lailuma Sadid speaking at the microphone; on the left, Shada Islam.

THEMES DISCUSSED

Building Intersectional Solidarity in Europe

Recognising that refugee women are migrant women and that migrant women are also European women, is crucial. In their introductions particularly, Shada, Lailuma, and Cecilia emphasised whilst sharing their own history **how the experiences of migrant and racialised women in Europe must be acknowledged as integral to the broader European identity.**

However, Shada added how solidarity from white women in Europe has often been insufficient, with white feminism failing to fully address the intersecting struggles faced by women:

“Now it's not a question of skin colour. I insist. It's about attitudes: you can be a Brown white feminist you can be a Black white feminist, etc. It's a Eurocentric approach. It [white feminism] negates or ignores intersectionality. It doesn't see how systems of oppression – where you're from, your economic background, your social status, your sexual orientation – how all of those come together and create a different kind of experience. [...] So that [white] feminist agenda, I reject it. It has to be intersectional. It has to be inclusive, and inclusive feminism is what I think we should all be working for.”

This disconnect highlights the urgent need for greater unity and a feminism that is intersectional and inclusive. **The fight against the far-right in Europe cannot be won in isolation – it demands solidarity across all communities, starting locally before trying to change national/international organization continued Cecilia.** Only by standing together, recognising shared struggles, and **working collectively** can the rise of far-right ideologies be effectively challenged, paving the way for a more inclusive and just Europe for everyone.

Decolonising Political Engagement

There is an urgent need to decolonise European policies, particularly foreign policy, and address their impact on countries like Afghanistan where Lailuma is from. She explained how the voices of racialised communities, including migrant and refugee women, are often excluded from discussions that directly affect their lives:

“Sometimes, when I go in some conferences, they [politicians] are talking on behalf of Palestinians or Israelis or Africans, but they [Palestinians, Israelis, Africans] are not really visible in the room, and they [politicians] are making a decision. I say “Come on!” We should bring them [those concerned by foreign policies]. They should talk. They should share everything and based on that; we should make a decision. Otherwise, it does not make sense.”

All panellists emphasised how this exclusion reinforces a neocolonial mindset, where decisions are made without considering the perspectives of those most impacted.

Genuine political engagement requires the active inclusion of diverse groups, particularly, those historically marginalised and racialised. Political parties and organisations must actively seek out voices from various backgrounds to ensure that policies reflect the needs of all communities.

However, as **Marie-Pierre Nyatanyi, representative of Plurielles**, working with Sub-Saharan migrant women, in the audience pointed out, **Africa is missing from these conversations** (e.g., genocide in Sudan, Rwanda, Congo, etc.). There is a need for feminists to **discuss race and double consciousness** (dual self-perception) experienced by Black migrants. We need to **decolonize their/our own attitudes and internalized misogynoir when talking about migration so Black women and Black women migrants can feel included in our feminism**. Shada supported that the almost complete absence of Black women that peculiar day could be explained by the **division within anti-racist feminist movements** walking on parallel paths, whilst a common message/union is needed, which could be against fascism, although smaller anti-racist groups have their own importance and relevance.

Migrant women face significant barriers to political participation, often rooted in systemic racism and colonial attitudes, which limit their ability. Building solidarity among women and fostering collective action are essential for challenging these structures of inequality and creating a more inclusive and equitable political landscape.

The Role of Media

Shada pointed out how **media and journalists have a critical responsibility** to challenge existing stereotypes and challenge politicians and narratives to better reflect the realities of migrant women to fight against the far right:

“[As journalists] we should not listen. We should be willing to challenge and question politicians, and increasingly [...] in today’s Europe, we don’t challenge our politicians. We give them – the more extreme they are – publicity and visibility because you want the clicks, you want the advertising, you want the viewers, you want the leaders, so you go for the extreme and I think that is something that we should be afraid of. There is darkness out there and we have lived through that darkness in Europe, and we are walking into it again if we continue to demonize minorities, racialized minorities.”



From left to right: Cecilia Torres, Lailuma Sadid, Shada Islam, and Emma Rainey.

Lailuma shared that the reason why she became a journalist was to be free to ask things, especially as Afghan women are prevented from following a career in journalism among other things. Nevertheless, in Belgium, she is sometimes denied to do so, denied to ask questions on Afghanistan, on Afghan women, and sometimes whilst being the only Afghan woman journalist in the room. **Journalists and media must prioritise accuracy, fairness, and inclusivity in their reporting, ensuring the voices of migrant women are meaningfully heard and their diverse contributions to society are recognised and celebrated.**

Gender Equity in Politics & Policy

Achieving gender equity in political spaces demands women's active involvement in decision-making processes across all levels and sectors. All panellists discussed **how true political participation means engaging women in meaningful ways, empowering them to shape policies and influence decisions that directly impact their lives and communities.** This includes ensuring broader participation, with women taking on roles not only in formal political positions but also as activists, community leaders, and members of civil society. Such an inclusive approach values **women's contributions from diverse spheres of life**, enhancing the effectiveness and inclusivity of policies. Cecilia added that:

“We also need to encourage ... women's organizations to make women speak in public. Because there are highly intelligent women, but they don't have the experience of expressing themselves in a coordinated way. At Le Collectif des Femmes, we show them how to do it: we practise, we practise, we practise, and that's good. Thereby, women lose their fear of speaking in public.”

She explained how in Europe, there are negative stereotypes of migrants and the invisibilisation of migrant women, confining them to traditional roles such as caregivers and limiting their visibility in broader societal contexts. She pointed out how **some migrant women fear speaking out, are not used to social media, or simply cannot participate in politics due to political parties' schedules (e.g., meetings late at night while they are taking care of their kids).**

Political parties have a role to play: they should adapt, support, and include these women so they can participate in politics whilst taking into consideration these challenges. **Empowering women to actively participate in these processes challenges existing power dynamics and contributes to the creation of more equitable and just societies, fostering a truly inclusive political landscape.**

Particular emphasis is needed on **involving women from migrant and racialised backgrounds in decision-making processes at local, national, and international levels, which is far from the case today saddened Lailuma and Cecilia.** Although Shada expressed how we need to be careful of **tokenism** which is rampant in European institutions. Activism serves as a vital form of political engagement, enabling women to drive change through advocacy, grassroots organising, and community mobilisation as the women's experiences in this panel demonstrate.

Gender-Based Violence (GBV)

Gender-based violence (GBV) **creates substantial barriers to women's involvement in decision-making and advocacy, limiting their ability to influence policies that address violence and discrimination.** Cultural and systemic practices within political parties exacerbate this issue, manifesting as exclusion, resource withholding, and ill-treatment, which foster a hostile environment for women in politics. Such dynamics perpetuate power imbalances and discourage women from pursuing leadership roles or asserting their voices in decision-making spaces, although **women in power do not necessarily mean for women** as Cecilia emphasises:

“It's not so much that the ECOLO political party is patriarchal, but it's a men's party. The problem is that the women who are inside [political parties], unfortunately, do not need to be women's representatives to work: there is no women's program to work on within the parties. Unfortunately, there are quotas, but quotas obey laws and are not for anything else. Sadly also, the women who get elected, we cannot be sure that they will work for women, for migrant women. No. Sometimes they are more “men” than the rest.”

Migrant and refugee women face heightened vulnerabilities to GBV due to factors such as precarious legal status, economic dependency, and social isolation, which marginalise them further. **Addressing GBV requires inclusive policies that not only target all women but also consider the unique experiences of migrant and refugee women.** An intersectional approach is essential, as effective policies must account for the varied ways women experience violence.

Advocacy and activism play vital roles in combating GBV, with women's organisations and activists raising awareness, supporting survivors, and pushing for legislative change. **Tackling GBV involves addressing not just individual acts of violence but also dismantling the cultural and systemic practices within political institutions that enable such violence.**

Comprehensive support systems, including access to legal aid, healthcare, and psychological support, are crucial for empowering survivors to reclaim their agency and fully participate in society, including political processes.



On the left, Cecilia Torres; on the right, Emma Rainey.

Crisis and Resilience

Multifaceted challenges posed by economic downturns and geopolitical conflicts have a disproportionate impact on marginalised groups, particularly migrant women. **Crises often exacerbate existing inequalities, making these groups more vulnerable to job losses, reduced access to services, exploitation, and violence** as Shada and Lailuma stressed at the end of the event. Geopolitical conflicts compound these issues, leading to displacement and increased risks.

Solidarity among women was emphasised as crucial during times of crisis. By sharing experiences, offering mutual support, and advocating for policy changes, women can navigate these challenging times together. **Collaboration and community-building** were identified as essential strategies for fostering shared resources and solutions. **Collective action was seen as key to strengthening resilience, as organising and fighting for their rights helps address immediate needs while working towards long-term structural change** emphasised Lailuma:

“Don't forget that there are crises. Always. But more victims are women in [these] different crises, so we should work together and find a solution, otherwise we cannot succeed.”

Building resilient communities is key to fostering equity and inclusion. **By tackling the root causes of vulnerability and preparing for future crises through collective action, we can create a foundation for stronger, more just societies.**

Harnessing Digital Spaces

Digital spaces play a crucial role in fostering connectivity and discourse, particularly for marginalised groups of women. **These platforms offer vital opportunities for women to share experiences, exchange ideas, and engage in discussions that might be inaccessible in traditional settings** as Shada pointed out. She explained how they serve

as powerful tools for networking, advocacy, and empowerment, enabling women to mobilise support for various causes and amplify their voices.

However, concerns about safety and accessibility persist, especially with Musk and Twitter/X. **Women from racialised backgrounds often face heightened risks of online harassment, abuse, and discrimination, highlighting the need for safer digital environments where they can express themselves without fear of reprisal.** Shada explained how much hate she gets and the loss of followers every time she mentions the genocide in Gaza. Additionally, disparities in access to digital technology continue to exclude many women from fully participating in online conversations which the Collectif des Femmes and Cecilia try to remediate.

To address these challenges, it is essential to **create secure and inclusive digital spaces, supported by effective guidelines and moderation practices to ensure the safety and well-being of all users.** Digital literacy also plays a key role in empowering women to navigate these platforms effectively, advocate for their rights, and build solidarity. By tackling these issues, digital spaces can be transformed into powerful tools for connection, empowerment, and change.



Members of the audience on the day of the event.

RECOMMENDATIONS

Create Safe and Inclusive Spaces

Establish both physical and digital safe spaces where women, particularly those from migrant and racialised backgrounds, can share experiences, seek support, and engage in discussions free from discrimination or harassment.

Promote Intersectional Feminism

Advocate for feminist movements to adopt an intersectional approach that addresses the diverse experiences of women. This includes actively involving women of colour, migrant women, queer women, and those with disabilities in discussions and decision-making processes, ensuring their voices are heard and valued.

Enhance Digital Literacy and Accessibility

Develop training programmes to improve digital literacy, empowering women to navigate online spaces safely and effectively. Simultaneously, work to increase access to technology and the internet for marginalised women to ensure equitable participation in digital advocacy and discussions.

Facilitate Intergenerational and Cross-Cultural Dialogues

Organise events and forums that bring together women from different generations and cultural backgrounds to exchange experiences and foster mutual understanding. Such initiatives can bridge divides and promote solidarity among diverse groups of women.



Members of the audience during the Q&A during of the event.

Advocate for Policy Reform

Engage in advocacy efforts to influence policies that address systemic inequalities impacting migrant women. Push for stronger protections against gender-based violence, discrimination, and economic disparities to create a fairer society.

Support Mental Health and Well-Being

Recognise the impact of crises, such as economic or geopolitical challenges, on the mental health of migrant and racialised women. Provide accessible resources, counselling services, and community support groups to address their mental health needs effectively.

Encourage Collective Action and Solidarity

Promote a culture of solidarity by encouraging women to unite around shared challenges, exchange stories, and advocate for their rights collectively. Collective action strengthens their ability to create meaningful change.

Increase Representation in Leadership

Advocate for greater representation of migrant women in leadership roles across politics, media, and community organisations. This ensures their perspectives are included in decision-making and contributes to more inclusive leadership.



From left to right: Christina Reyna, Tamara Ibarrola, and Marie-Pierre Nyatanyi.

Utilise Social Media for Advocacy

Harness social media platforms to raise awareness about the issues faced by migrant women. Create impactful campaigns that highlight their stories, mobilise support, and encourage widespread community engagement.

Monitor and Evaluate Diversity Initiatives

Regularly review the effectiveness of diversity and inclusion efforts within organisations and movements. Gather feedback from participants to identify gaps and refine strategies to achieve better outcomes.

Foster Economic Empowerment

Support programmes that promote the economic empowerment of migrant women and other marginalised groups, such as job training, mentorship, and entrepreneurship opportunities. These initiatives can help women overcome barriers to financial independence and professional advancement.

Encourage Research on Migrant Women's Experiences

Fund and support research projects that explore the experiences of migrant and racialised women, particularly during crises or periods of social change. Such research can provide valuable insights to inform more effective practices and policies.



Members of the audience, and in the center, Amazone Maison's room where the event took place.



Members of the audience after the event over lunch.



ANNEX: EVENT PROGRAMME

TIME	AGENDA ITEM
9:00 - 9:45	Registration and Breakfast
9:45 - 10:00	Opening Remarks, Tamara Ibarrola, Chaska
10:00 - 10:15	Project Presentation, Cristina Reyna, Board Member, WIDE+ Followed by 5 mins for Q&A
10:15 - 11:45	Panel: Pathways to Participation and Ending Violence Against Migrant Women in Politics • Shada Islam, EU Affairs Commentator & Founder of New Horizons Project • Lailuma Sadid, ULB Research Assistant, Journalist, EU Election Candidate 2024 • Cecilia Torres, Municipal Councilor, Ottignies-Louvain-la-Neuve, ECOLO Party Moderator: Emma Rainey, WE-EMPOWER Project Coordinator at WIDE+ The discussion will be followed by a 30-minute Q&A session
11:45 - 12:00	Closing Remarks, Amancaye Gastorres, Collectif des Femmes
12:00 - 13:00	Lunch and Networking

