# 'I am still waiting for my papers but 'inna Allāha ma'a al-ṣābirīn' : on religious temporality and agency in female marriage migrants' precarious migration experiences

# "I am still waiting for my papers but *ʾinna Allāha maʿa al-ṣābirīn*"[1]: On religious temporality and agency in female marriage migrants' precarious migration experiences

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[1] Translated as: God is with those who are patient.

*Main document*

# "I am still waiting for my papers but *ʾinna Allāha maʿa al-ṣābirīn"*[2]*:* On religious temporality and agency in female marriage migrants' precarious migration experiences.


## Abstract (English)

Building on postcolonial, feminist and gendered migration theories and the 'turn to mobility' this article aims to explore the agency of so-called low-skilled Moroccan female marriage migrants in Flanders (Belgium). More precisely, it aims to study how religious temporality plays a role and how it shapes their experiences in a specific context of migration and precariousness. It will question how these women invoke a religious temporality in confronting the uncertainties and difficulties of which motherhood and a precarious residency status are the most challenging and stigmatising. Focussing on two ethnographic vignettes this article will first empirically analyse their nonlinear, risky and often undocumented trajectories laying bare a politico-discursive temporality in marriage migration, motherhood and belonging. Secondly it will analyse how exactly these women tend to challenge this bureaucratic temporality. The analyses show that through their active engagement with *sabr* (patience) and *tawakkul* (reliance on God) these women become agents.



## Keywords

Migrant motherhood, undocumented migrants, Islam, religious temporality, agency


[2] Translated as: God is with those who are patient.

# Introduction

As the experience of migration can no longer be understood as a simple journey from one place or country to another (Schrooten et al., 2015) today it instead often consists of complex and non-linear mobilities in which migrants move across borders and between social locations and residency statuses in unanticipated and unplanned ways (Robertson, 2019). While colonial feminist political discourses on migration and integration (Miri, 2020; Farris, 2017) strive to discard the so-called "failed migrant" (Constable, 2014) and preserve the idea of (marriage) migration as a linear trajectory of forward progress and (female) empowerment, in practice many of these migrants have already lived in precariousness in the country of settlement for years before becoming visible and formalising their status of marriage migrant which to some point may increase their social and legal security (Griffiths et. al, 2013). Moreover the interconnected debates and challenges concerning marriage migration, motherhood and integration are often rooted in specific temporalities or understandings of time. In order to understand migrant women's non-linear, risky and often un-documented trajectories and their responses and experiences we need to rethink the way the temporal is studied in migration. In doing so this article aims to contribute to existing research on migration and temporality which has especially focused on initial imaginaries of migrants (Salazar, 2011) or temporalities in the context of asylum or refugees (Vandevoordt & Fleischmann, 2020). More specifically this article aims to study how *religious* temporality plays a role and how it shapes female migrant's experiences in this specific context of family migration and precariousness.

Building on postcolonial, feminist and gendered migration theories and the "turn to mobility" (Griffiths et al., 2013; Fabos & Isotalo, 2014) this paper further aims to explore the agency of so-called low-skilled Moroccan marriage migrant women in Flanders (Belgium) of which many still found themselves in the process of regularisation (during the period of research). It will question how these women invoke a religious temporality which is central both in their language as part of their lived religion and most importantly in confronting or navigating uncertainties and difficulties of migration of which motherhood and a precarious

residency status - due to restrictive migration regulations - are the most challenging and stigmatising. In doing so this paper positions itself within the emerging area of research on mobility and temporality in which the particular conflict "*between the institutional or bureaucratic time of the state, which 'claims to be absolute, universal, total' and individual time 'which is personal, quotidian, limited*'" (Gross, 1982 in Griffiths et al., 2013, p. 30) is being studied. More specific this paper will question how Muslim migrant mothers' embodied religious temporality - that is, their Islamic understanding and valorisation of time – offers a unique reference point to deal with their precarious residency, with motherhood, and in doing so potentially challenge a political or bureaucratic temporality in migration. Especially challenging in their experiences - and under-researched in intersection with marriage migration - is migrant motherhood, since this amplifies their financial and social vulnerability (Gedalof, 2009). Using the case of low-skilled, newcomer Moroccan female marriage migrants living in Flanders[3] it will be argued that these women face many gendered challenges of building partner and family relationships, proving the authenticity of their marriage, trying to belong into the new society, and bearing and mothering children (Miri et al., 2020; Erel, 2003). The methodological section will elaborate more on the characteristics of the research participants as well as on the context in which the research was conducted.

This paper starts from the premise that Muslim women's navigations and resiliences in contexts of precarity and distress are often fuelled by having patience and faith in what will come (Ahaddour, 2018). Largely inspired by Saba Mahmood's (2005) influential work on agency scholars present Islamic virtues of patience (*sabr*) and the reliance on God (*tawakkul*) as agential modes that rely on a conception of the self that goes beyond the binary of subordination and resistance (Jacobsen 2011 in Fadil, 2019; Fadil & Fernando, 2015). Unlike in studies on religion and agency, Hagan & Ebaugh (2003) argue that migration scholars have failed to include the role of lived religion or spirituality in the migration process, especially as a form of subjectivity and the resources it provides for some immigrants in the decision to migrate and their commitment to endure the hardship that comes with migration. This article

[3] This was part of a larger study on marriage migration, motherhood and integration (Miri et al., 2020)

aims to narrow this gap and study what *sabr* and *tawakkul* could mean in this specific context of migration and precariousness. Central here is how migrant women's vision of their limited ability to change their uncertain or precarious social/legal positions through planning stands in contrast to the idea of uncertainty and suffering as problems with feasible human solutions which contributes to an alternative orientation towards time and agency in migration (Scherz, 2013). This makes that even if these women cannot strategize or are bound by legal and societal structures their successful migration trajectories are believed to be (malleably) destined (Elliot, 2016) and as such only with God. In her ethnographic study with Syrian refugees in Jordan, Lokot (2023) refers to the concept of 'nasib', a similar idea to having faith in what is destined. Unlike 'tawakkul', 'nasib' refers to that whatever happens has been 'written' by God and therefore cannot be changed.

In the **first** part of this paper I will present some relevant theoretical discussions concerning family migration, migrant motherhood and precarity. Additionally I will elaborate on how temporality is interlinked with immigrant's feelings of belonging and 'paper stress', how imaginings of the future affect immigrants' experiences in the present and how this relates to our understanding of their agency (Griffiths et al., 2013).

The **second** part will empirically explore the notions of religious temporality in general and *sabr* and *tawakkul* more specific and how this relates to their subjectivity as immigrant mothers' in navigating their journeys. It does so by attending in particular to how they - from an embodied relation to Islam - do *religious* 'mindwork' (Mahler & Pessar, 2001;2003) when navigating the risks and uncertainties of which motherhood and a precarious residency status - due to restrictive migration regulations - are the most challenging and stigmatising. In doing so this article hopes to make visible a set of voices and perspectives that are generally absent from societal debates and migration policies which are indispensable for dealing appropriately, both on a theoretical level and in policy terms, with challenges of migration, motherhood and integration.

## Critical methodology and data collection

This article responds to the scholarly calls to analyse migration from an intersectional (Williams, 2010; Anthias, 2012) and spatio-temporal (King et. al, 2006; Erel & Ryan, 2019; Griffiths et. al, 2013; Mahler & Pessar, 2001,2006) perspective. In order to understand marriage migrant women's decisions, experiences and patience in light of their precarious positions this article will analytically build and expand on Floya Anthias' (2012) concept of the 'translocational' which attends to the centrality of power and social hierarchy in transnational migration building on the idea of "*intersectionality as a critical methodology*" (Davis, 2014). Migrant women's experiences of nonlinear, risky (often undocumented) trajectories become more meaningful in this 'translocational' (Anthias, 2012) reality from different temporal and spatial social locations as multiple scaled, intersecting hierarchies of gender, class, race/ethnicity, religion and residency status. More specific I will argue that this 'translocational sensitivity' (Anthias, 2012) in the case of Muslim (marriage) migrant mothers' uncertain and risky trajectories implies an exploration of multiple temporalities or alternative understandings of time in migration studies. Relevant about this 'translocational' (Anthias, 2012) framework is the possibility to bring in more complexity when analysing marriage migrant women's intersecting social relations as at times mutually reinforcing (*e.g.* their precarious residency status affects them in multiple and different political, socio-economic and cultural contexts) and at times contradictory (*e.g.* as depending on their male spouses for legal and social rights they often find themselves in a relation of subordination to their husbands; whereas as mothers they often are in a relation of more power within the household) (Anthias, 2012). Also, it sheds light on understanding these intersections as varying in a transnational context (Anthias, 2012). This need for more complexity also implies to their status as so-called 'low-skilled' migrants especially if we take in to account the centrality of power and social hierarchy that are present in these women's lives. This paper thus problematizes the term of 'low-skilled' migrants and instead wishes to 'rethink the (un)skilled migrant' (Vigouroux, 2017) and highlight their reproductive skills which are not truly valorised

and bring forth and explore their (religious) embodied capital (Bourdieu, 1986).

In the context of this study - as part of my doctoral dissertation – I carried out ethnographic research with two distinct groups of Muslim mothers in the context of their participation in a local citizenisation programme organised in the city of Antwerp. Citizenisation, mainly used in an European context, refers to an 'integration' policy that requires noncitizens to acquire 'citizen-like' skills and socio-cultural values in view of seeking citizenship or other forms of settlement (Fortier 2016). In Antwerp, this pilot citizenisation programme was developed to promote the integration of 'low literate migrant mothers of children between 0 and 3 or pregnant women of a non-EU background' (AGII 2019; EC). This programme provided an interesting case study, situated at the intersection of (gendered and classed) migration, motherhood and citizenship. The ethnographic data collection included a total of eight semi-structured, in-depth interviews with migrant mothers and two focus group discussions with migrant mothers. Additionally I conducted weekly observations in each of the two courses, and other informal conversations both during and outside the courses. As Moroccan-Arabic is my mother tongue and in order to engage with these mothers' realities and potentials, I conducted all the interviews and conversations in this language. The courses - which combined language learning and integration courses as well as child-rearing support - took place in Antwerp twice a week and ran from March 2017 until the end of August of 2020. There were twenty participants who were mainly Moroccan enrolled in the programme. The participants were aged between 25 and 40 years residing in Belgium for approximately three years. Some of the women, had first emigrated to other European countries before coming to Belgium.

## A politico-discursive temporality in marriage migration, motherhood and belonging

### Marriage migration, Muslim motherhood and temporality

In contrast to simplistic scholarly, state and legislative definitions of marriage migration this paper engages with a definition based on more complexity and variability (Williams, 2010). Building on Lucy Williams' work (2010) on cross-border marriage migrants, it will be argued that marriage migration is a form of migration which is increasingly characterised by multiple, variable and complex processes and meanings for migrants themselves. Increasingly more 'family related migrants' (Kofman, 2004) have already been living undocumented in the country of settlement for a while before applying for marriage migration or family reunification which is often a way to increase their security in terms of welfare rights and rights of residence (Williams, 2010). From a legal human rights perspective Estrada-Tanck (2016) defines undocumented migrants as those people without a residence permit that would authorise them to regularly stay or work in their country of destination. Estrada-Tanck argues that the paths to becoming undocumented are complex and as she continues: "*at times the result of arbitrary policies and procedures over which the migrant has little or no control* (Estrada-Tanck, 2016: 121)." Many of the participants of this research have been unsuccessful in their family reunification procedure, have overstayed their visa or have entered the country irregularly causing them to feel what they call 'paper stress'. The latter has been empirically investigated in the context of single Mizrahi mothers in Israel under the concept of 'bureaucratic pain' (Lavie, 2012) and 'administrative violence' as discussed by Leinonen & Pellander (2020) in the context of separated refugee familiesHowever empirical migrant-centred research on the entire and complex process of migration including 'paper stress' as linked to their invisible trajectories before becoming documented or formally recognised as being "in procedure for" family reunification is scarce (Brouckaert & Longman, 2018).

Opposed to more static - also in terms of personal development -, linear and one-directional understandings of migration trajectories and experiences this article thus engages with marriage migration as increasingly marked by changing migration trajectories or "*shifting migration patterns*" (Robertson, 2019). These shifting patterns are often characterised by what Robertson calls "*contingent, multi-directional and multi-stage mobility pathways – where the boundaries between temporariness and permanence (as both legal status and subjective state) are increasingly blurry and mutable"* (Robertson, 2019, p. 170). Within this "*blurring of boundaries between types of migrants*" (Castles, 2003 in Griffiths et al., 2013), I identify many of the research participants who were (in legal procedure to become) formally documented as a marriage migrant. However it is important to emphasize that many of them had other previous, risky and often invisible journeys before. As becomes clear in the following vignette of Iman, many of my participants were visa over-stayers who lived and worked undocumented for years, of which some were classified as needing to leave the territory because of a 'failed' marriage or divorce (cf. probationary rule) and others who continue to live and engage in 'motherwork' (PH Collins, 1994) with a precarious residency status.

## VIGNETTE 1 – IMAN

"*In 2005 I went to the Netherlands on a tourist visa and then I came here (Belgium). In Morocco I worked in a shoe factory for almost 15 years, so I worked very hard to take care of myself and my parents. When my sister who lives in the Netherlands, offered me housing, I applied for a visa. I had no savings on my (bank) account though. When they granted me a visa, I was crying. I honestly thought: 'why did they give me a visa, I want to stay with my mother'. I didn't want to come here. My brother asked why I was crying, I said I don't want to go abroad but God is the one who determines what will happen. When I came here (Europe) I was under stress because of all the paperwork. I lived with my sister for almost five years when I came here. I lived and worked there for years without having a residence permit. My sister has her own house. I worked in houses and received EUR 12-13 an hour. I did ironing and cleaning work. They gave me the keys to their houses and every now and then my sister came with me. When she went on holiday to Morocco, I stayed alone and worked all the time. I also worked for a*

*catering service during weekends. My mother was very sick, so I sent her whatever I had left. When I came here (Belgium) to get regularised, that didn't really work out. Then I met my husband. He had applied for family reunification but because I was a visa over-stayer the lawyers say I should go back to Morocco. I cannot go to Morocco with three children. Even if I went alone I have nowhere to leave my children because their father works shifts. My sister lives in the Netherlands and my sister-in-law already has seven children. (…) Who is going to watch over them before and after school? That paper stress ruins half of your life. Really. It ruins all your dreams. You want stability. You're getting old. You want to build a future and work. (…) Your life is being ruined. They stop it. They don't believe that we are really married. My husband has a residence permit and he has just applied for (Belgian) nationality at the court. Do you know how much the lawyers cost me? My husband says it's okay: "just leave it"… The lawyer said that only when he (her husband) would obtain (Belgian) nationality I will receive my residence permit. She (lawyer) said they will answer in two weeks. We are still waiting for a response from the court and the municipality. When my husband's affairs are in order, the lawyer can make an appointment for me and I will receive my residence papers within 7 to 8 months. Most importantly, there is still hope but now it is as if I have become closed off. It's like they don't recognize me. They do whatever they want to you. They choose the appointment they like, you know? I don't understand that*".

## Staggered trajectories, imagined futures and agency

Little research has centred the temporal in relation to migrant experience and subjectivity (Robertson, 2019 for an exception see Erel & Ryan, 2019). A significant proportion of this work, Robertson (2019) argues, has focused on 'suspended' time, for example how 'waiting' is experienced at the borders by asylum seekers and displaced people (Jacobsen, Karlsen & Khosravi, 2020; Griffiths, 2014) or in the context of undocumented workers (Ahmad, 2008). Under researched are migration experiences of waiting or so-called suspension from the point of view of agency of marriage migrant women with a precarious residency status. Their vulnerability depends on family migration regulations and the bureaucratic or "legal time" (Stronks, 2017) of State policies which is being exacerbated by the experience of

discrimination, affected by a combination of gender, class, and racial inequalities (Jacobsen et al., 2020; Nawyn, 2010; Duyvendak, Geschiere and Tonkens, 2016). The case of Iman sheds light on the intersecting challenges of marriage migration (policies), migrant motherhood and belonging and how the latter and her experiences thereof are rooted in specific temporalities or understandings of time. Iman's narrative is not only characterised by a temporal language, her story also moves back and forth in time and space (she often goes back to how it was in Morocco before moving to Belgium or the Netherlands). Furthermore her narrative exposes how the State uses time to police borders and how restrictive marriage migration regulations in particular make use of time to manage immigration (Stronks, 2017) and commend an ideal migrant that conforms to a flowing sequence of events from arrival, productivity, integration and ultimately to naturalisation or return (Griffiths et. al, 2017). Additionally we can discern a specific, *religious* temporality in the way she looks at the future and what she sees as a divine decree or destiny (Elliot & Menin, 2018). The temporal length of the legal procedures (during which the immigration administration makes an evaluation) next to other restrictive regulations based on time such as the probationary rule affect these women's lives in drastic and complex ways (Miri, 2020). Moreover Iman's migration experience and trajectory is shaped by her specific position as both a Muslim mother and a marriage migrant. This specific intersection of marriage migration and motherhood brings about many gendered challenges of building partner and family relationships, proving the authenticity of one's marriage, trying to belong into a new society, and bearing and mothering children (Miri et al., 2020; Erel, 2011). Additionally this latter is defined by time in particular ways: being a migrant mother with a Muslim background makes it even more difficult as many women wish to have children or become a mother and hope for their children to have a (better) future here while at the same time being afraid as bearing and mothering a child in their precarious positions may exacerbate their vulnerability (Miri, 2020). Furthermore many women have to deal with the stigma as a result of the fight against false declarations of parenthood, meaning a declaration of parenthood in order to obtain an advantage in terms of residence (European Migration Network, 2012).

Against societal and political discourses of marriage migration that strive for the eradication of risk and uncertainty in the migration processes of specific types of migrants (e.g. saving migrant women and fight against forced or scam marriage) (Miri, 2020); this paper approaches risk, uncertainty and so-called failure as inherent to migration and as potentially offering more (future) perspectives and solidary or creative ways of being in the new society (Constable, 2005; Halberstam, 2011). In doing so it helps to shed light on how low-skilled Muslim migrant women may also respond to their risky and often "staggered migrations" (Robertson, 2019) as a (long-term) investment made by themselves in order to gain a better future for themselves or their loved ones - or to bring relief somewhere in the future - and as such as a process of cognitive agency or 'mindwork' (Mahler & Pessar, 2003). As stated by Khosravi (2020) waiting thus implies a state of consciousness in which our minds are at work, being attentive and oriented (Khosravi in Jacobsen et al., 2020). Relevant in this respect is how migration could involve migrants having to do things they may not have normally chosen to do for a specific period to obtain a specific migration outcome (Robertson, 2019). This migration outcome however needs to be thought of beyond so-called 'rational' and calculated economic or financial drivers for migration, which fail to present migrants' larger goals other than simple self-preservation and betterment as migration is motivated by evolving and complex needs and desires (Williams, 2010). Also, according to Bailey & Boyle (2004), the dynamics of household and intra-household relations are important to consider in order to understand migration decisions and experiences. Like in Iman's case migrant women would marry someone they do not know so long, would do unofficial work, would have a baby when actually they are not yet ready in a legal way and so on… Hidaya for example explained how multiple coinciding events made them decide life would be better in Belgium than in Spain: the economic crisis that has led to severe problems for the country's economy and society, the severe austerity measures which imposed financial cuts in education and health care and especially the difficulty to adapt without family that could emotionally support her:

> "So we went to my cousin's wedding in Belgium. My whole family here welcomed us. We stayed with my aunt for three days. My husband finds it difficult to stay at someone's house but this time he said, 'Subhan Allah (Praise God), I entered your aunt's house, as if I had entered

> your mother's.' He said: 'I didn't know it was going to be like that.' At first he really didn't want to visit Belgium. I have been waiting and whining for a really long time to finally come and visit my family. I hadn't come here before so I put pressure on him especially that summer because we hadn't gone to Morocco that year and I said: 'We will go. Perhaps you will enjoy yourself there'. And when we came he was having a good time. My family told him: 'There is no future there in Spain. There are plenty of restaurants here where you can work and the education system is better for the kids.' One day he went to my cousin's husband who owns a shop. They started talking to each other and he said, 'I would like to change (the country).' They started talking like this until that man said, 'Say bismillah [tawakkul 'ala Allah] (in the name of Allah). There is a house for rent here. Do you want to visit it? He went to view it, but the problem was that he was still working in Spain. (…) So he called me and said, 'I have looked at a house, shall we rent it?' I said (laughing): 'You still ask me?! (happy) Rent and say bismillah!'. Even though it was nothing special [and I was not really convinced], I said, 'This is it. No problem. We're renting it'." (Hidaya)

As Lucy Williams (2010) argues, although structure and agency are always simultaneously present in peoples' lives and the balance may differ between various types of migrants, their lives should not be considered as entirely bound by structural constraints (Williams, 2010). Important to emphasize in this respect is how migrants are acting towards "imagined futures" (Griffiths et. al, 2017) and may always find new opportunities and new ways to negotiate for additional power and autonomy (Parrenas, 2001; Yuval-Davis, 2015). Despite the urge of migration scholars to appreciate the future (Salazar, 2011; Griffiths et. al, 2017) in contrast to the past, far less attention has been paid to the analytical potentials of considering the future in understanding these migrant women's patience and perseverance in confronting or navigating uncertainty and precariousness. As have been the subject of many studies (Salazar, 2011; Williams, 2010; Mahler & Pessar, 2003; Constable, 2005), in this article, Iman, Hidaya and the other research participants are considered to be active agents in the way they do 'mindwork' (Mahler & Pessar, 2001) and imagine and navigate their (future) migration processes and future lives. Barbara Adam's work is worth mentioning here as she engages extensively with notions of future imaginaries and explores the notion of the "*not yet*" (Adam, 2009; 2010 in Griffiths et. al, 2013; Khosravi, 2020). This notion which is central for the next

part of this paper is also addressed by religious scholars who, from a perspective of "religious temporality" (Deeb, 2006), urges us to trouble the temporal divide between past and future and argues for a focus on 'multiple temporalities' as a connected focus on past and future together (Deeb, 2006; Elliot & Menin, 2018; Rogozen-Soltar, 2019). The next part will thus focus more on how exactly Muslim migrant mothers' embodied religious temporality - that is, their Islamic understanding and valorisation of time – offers an interesting reference point to deal with their specific reality as (low-skilled) mothers with a precarious residency, and could potentially challenge a political or bureaucratic temporality in (the regulation of) migration.

## Challenging bureaucratic time: "we are moving within God's plan"

### VIGNETTE 2 – MALIKA

I met Malika for the first time at IVCA[4] - Intercultural Women's Centre in Antwerp - in 2018. IVCA is an open house for women with a migrant background that live in a vulnerable situation. It is a safe meeting space that offers a wide range of activities and workshops ranging from sports and IT workshops, citizenisation[5] and Dutch conversation classes and help with administrative or legal issues. Malika was part of the group of women that joined the citizenisation programme for low-skilled mothers with pre-school children. As part of my doctoral research I conducted participant observation during Flemish integration classes for a period of six months. Prior to that I also volunteered in a small team of social workers that offered administrative or legal support. During this period it became clear that many (marriage) migrant women mentally suffered from what they called 'paper stress', both in their countries of origin (or transit countries) and in Belgium. This 'paper stress' and the related burden of bureaucracy and "bureaucratic time" (Gross, 1982 in Griffiths et al., 2013, p. 30) continued to come up very often during the citizenisation programme as well (Miri et

[4] Since 2020 IVCA changed her name into Alma.
[5] The logic of 'citizenisation' in Western Europe and specifically in Flanders or Belgium demands that newcomers acquire information about certain cultural practices, languages, ethnicities and religions, laws, and the citizen's legal rights.

al., 2020). Remarkably this ‘paper stress’ had something specific and ambiguous to it as it seemed at times to take over their lives while at the same time it did not stop them to continue facing reality and move on. For many women this meant investing in their role as mothers and in this case also in their integration process as this citizenisation programme in which they took part explicitly targeted migrant mothers with both legal and in-process citizenship statuses (Miri, 2020). Another remarkable aspect was their patience and how when mentioning their precariousness the women always seemed to have faith in what will come. This becomes clear in the story of Malika as she became pregnant in Dubai while knowing that she would have to be separated from her husband for quite a while as they had decided that he would emigrate to apply for asylum in Belgium. It would take about a year until she would be able to join her husband in Belgium.

Malika is an intelligent, confident and outgoing woman in her mid-thirties. I continued having contact with Malika next to the classes, especially after she asked me to help her out with her son’s situation and was pregnant of her second child. We went to one of her first appointments at the children’s hospital by bus and I felt privileged: my son was at school and I was “working” even if at times I forgot about that and it felt like I was accompanying my mother when she had her quarterly check-ups at the hospital. I could sense Malika feeling uncomfortable like it was always the case when I joined her. She would often say: ‘I’m sorry to bother you, you have helped me so much, may God reward you!’. I was feeling nervous because I knew we would have to get in to a personal conversation about her son and the worries she and her husband had about him. The waiting room in the hospital was packed and we waited for quite a while until the doctor came to get us. Often when welcoming us the doctors would seem confused about who is the mother of the patient but when I would great them in Dutch and easily anticipate on what they were saying, they soon understood that I am what they call a ‘friend who translates’. When entering the room the doctor asked some general questions about what the mother’s worries were about. Malika asked me to translate that she worried about her two and a half year old son who was not yet speaking and had a difficult eating pattern. She added that I should not forget to mention that he rubbed his ears

frequently. The doctor investigated the little boy and told me that it seemed like he is a bit late in his development but that especially his underweight and his lack of attention worried her. The doctor sat up a meeting for a hearing check-up and emphasised that if this is not a hearing problem that she would like to refer us to the hospital's Center for Developmental Disorders as it could be autism. Following this the doctor and her assistant started asking questions about Malika's husband and if they were related, how Malika's pregnancy was like and if she had a difficult labour or had any mental stress during pregnancy. I was amazed by the speed and direction that our conversation took but Malika seemed to manage answering the questions quite well: she asked me to translate to the doctor that her husband was Syrian and that they are by far related, that she and her husband used to live and work in Dubai while she was pregnant but that she moved back to Morocco and later joined her husband who had applied for asylum in Belgium. She added that of course she was worrying about the asylum procedure and worried about when she could be reunited with her husband but that she did not really experience this period of time as mentally stressful because she was surrounded by her family back home and relied on Allah. She knew that what was coming was part of her destiny or "nasib" (Lokot, 2023). When leaving the doctors' office I felt that Malika could tell something was wrong or at least more worrying than we would have expected. On the way to the bus stop she started talking about these specific questions and her previous experiences with administration and how they reminded her of the exhausting paper chase (of securing pieces of evidence) when applying for family reunification, the lack of information about regulations and exceptions and the uncertainty and distrust that came along with it (Hondagneu-Sotelo, 1994; Miri, 2020).

## Sabr & tawakkul: ʾinna Allāha maʿa al-ṣābirīn

For Muslims *sabr* (patience) represents one of the greatest heights of spiritual development that one can attain (Gatrad and Sheikh, 2002a). In this respect, many of the participants would often express God's blessing for being patient using *ʾinna Allāha maʿa al-ṣābirīn* meaning God is with those who are patient (Ahaddour, 2018). The risk and uncertainty that came with their migration processes were seen as part of this worldly life in which their difficult journeys were

seen as “malleably destined” (Elliot & Menin, 2018) causing *sabr* (patience) and *tawakkul* (reliance on God) to emerge as important assets. Here having *sabr* and *tawakkul* should be understood as an empowering temporal practice that represents a commitment both to accepting to live within the (precarious) present situation and a destined future (Hänsch, 2019). In this sense it is similar to the concept of ‘nasib’ as a coping strategy (Lokot, 2023) except that *sabr* and *tawakkul* emphasise on a more malleable destiny. A common thread in the narratives is how many participants waited quite a while - some even for years - for their residence permit and how they were patient and did *tawakkul* and continued with their lives. Important here is that *tawakkul* entails a form of action or ‘doing’. Many participants explained how they refused that this paper chase would hold them back from what God had intended for them so instead of passively waiting many participants moved on with their lives. As in the case of Sarah she did not cease her wish to have children:

> “I got pregnant and gave birth while I didn't have any papers yet. Mohammed was already six months old when I received my temporary residence permit (for six months). Before this, the police came by again at 8 am in the morning. That was a shock. The four of them came and asked if I was sleeping here, if I was really married or if it was a sham marriage. They said I needed residence documents: ‘if you want to stay here, you must have residence documents’. My husband then showed them that document from the lawyer that I am in proceedings. When they saw that I was pregnant, they also asked how long I was pregnant and when I would give birth” (Sarah).

Participants often emphasized how when having *sabr,* time can heal or bring relief. Many referred to how they will receive or encounter only that which is destined for them. As stated by Lokot (2023) in this sense having *sabr* and having faith in your ‘nasib’ can be used to both justify risky decisions and to soften regrettable ones. Like many other women Iman emphasised how she initially did not want to migrate because she did not want to leave her mother. Malika too did not think that she would migrate to another country again after Dubai because she was happy there nor that she would move back to Morocco for a while but because of her pregnancy and absent husband she preferred to move back to her parents’

home (temporarily). Hidaya narrated how she and her husband decided to migrate to Belgium after having lived in Spain for eleven years. She told me how she relied on God's bigger plan and on her Belgian family's support and took this leap of fate. During the conversations and interviews destiny was often mentioned. In the presented vignettes of Iman and Malika, as well as in the narratives of the other participants, the reasons for which they migrated and the uncertainties and difficulties that came along, are believed to gradually reveal themselves (Elliot & Menin, 2018). This belief is explained in Fadwa's narrative and how she migrated from Morocco to Spain and (temporarily) from Spain to the Netherlands and finally ended up married in Belgium several years later. When she was 16 years old - using the right of family reunification - Fadwa as the only minor child got reunited with her parents who already lived and worked in Spain for a couple of years. After a while she was asked by her sister - who got married and lived in the Netherlands - to come and live with her in order to help her out with her children:

> "She (sister) hadn't even consulted me. She asked my father if I could go with her. And so they had prepared my passport and booked the ticket. I was confronted with the facts. I couldn't get away from it. So I went to the Netherlands with my sister and helped her with her children. I carried on responsibilities at an age where a girl has yet to go through puberty. I played, laughed and joked, but underneath I was responsible for raising children (…).Raising the children of others is also not the same as raising your own. (…) But when you are all of a sudden confronted with a crying baby, you don't understand him. Or a small child that starts to speak Dutch to you. I come from a certain environment and that child came from a different one. So it was a very difficult situation. It took about a year. (…) In 2011 I went back again to visit them with our mother. It was the first time that our mother visited the Netherlands and my future sister-in-law (my sister's friend) had invited us. It was New Year's Eve. We went to visit her and that's where I met my husband for the first time. So it was destined to happen this way. I often thought: why am I still learning Dutch at all, what am I going to do with that? I often said to my sister's son: 'don't speak Dutch to me, speak Amazigh. I should watch Spanish television channels, to maintain my Spanish, what should I do with your language?' (…) '*You may dislike something when it is good for you. And you may love something when it is bad for you*' [Quranic verse].' We often do not know how things turn out and what is good for us." (Fadwa)

## Agency in challenging bureaucratic time

Like Fadwa, many participant's commitments to their unique journeys bring hope and enable agency in the form of perseverance (Hänsch, 2019). In doing so they try to anticipate something that is to come in the future, but which is believed to be determined, willed, or known prior to its emergence (Elliot & Menin, 2018). In this respect *sabr* & *tawakkul* are not to be understood as passive or silencing attitudes (Hamdy, 2009), but as temporal practices of agency directed towards a destined future (Elliot & Menin, 2018). To use Scherz' (2013) words many of these women believed themselves to be "*moving within God's plan"* (Scherz, 2013, p.?). Reflecting upon recent anthropological (re)theorizations of agency (Mahmood, 2005), this compels us to understand their agency as the capacity to navigate within the limits set by divine and bureaucratic power, rather than as the capacity to overcome them (Elliot & Menin, 2018). It is here that the temporal aspect of religion becomes important as this religious temporality helps these migrant women to literally and figuratively put things into perspective. In fact in doing so they could potentially challenge bureaucratic time as for a bureaucratic or political system that neglects actual life within the territory, loses its force (Stronks, 2017). Malika got married to a Syrian refugee whom she had met while working and living in Dubai. They realised that for a better future as a family they would have a better chance when applying for asylum in Europe. Her husband decided to migrate to Belgium because his friend managed to get asylum and convinced him to come. As Malika got pregnant and would be alone in Dubai she decided to move back to her home country Morocco and *take her time* in a more comfortable setting surrounded by her family before joining her husband (who had applied for family reunification). Even though the paper chase was difficult she was happy to have made the choice to move back to Morocco. After she had lived single and undocumented for years Iman on her turn wanted to change her situation of precariousness. She had overstayed her visa for years and wanted to finally get regularised and hopefully start a family. She explained to me how she was getting older and chose to marry in order to get more stability and have children. Within the limits set by her religious

beliefs on the one hand and the restrictive migration regulations on the other hand she choose for a partner that she did not know before and got married. She got three children while still waiting to get regularised which explains the frustration in her vignette. Despite of the latter Iman would often speak of how happy she is that she has her three children. In other words becoming a mother and investing in mothering can be seen here as a rewarding *investment of her time* spent in precariousness.

Zooming in to the vignettes of Iman and Malika it seems that these migrant mothers navigate between the possibilities of political structure on the one hand and their own personal aspirations with God as their guide and Islam or spirituality as their refuge. However not all women are equally adept at exercising *sabr* and *tawakkul*. As I have known both women for quite some time I can affirm that similar to their migration journeys, their spiritual journeys were not linear nor alike. Therefore at times they were better in trusting God than at other times. Many other participants also narrated about situations in which they felt angry or frustrated making it impossible to be patient. Or in many other situations having patience was all they got as migrant mothers - as returning to their home countries was often not an option. However their embodied religious temporality did *empower* themselves and each other in having confidence and patience, causing them to - while not (always) aware of it - be agents and possibly disrupt a bureaucratic temporality in migration policies.

## Conclusion

As little research has centred the temporal in relation to migrant experience and subjectivity, the objective of this article is to study migrant mother's migration experiences and risky trajectories from a (religious) temporal perspective. Building on the analytical framework of the 'translocational' (Anthias, 2012) a combined transnational and intersectional lens was used in the analysis of migrant women's narratives from different temporal and spatial social locations as multiple scaled, intersecting hierarchies of gender, class, race, religion and residency status. In other words building on this translocational lens which is sensitive for both different temporalities and the interaction between multiple societal structures this article

aimed to investigate migrant women's heterogeneous migration experiences and risky trajectories taking in to account their different social positions both before and after migration.

The first part of this article set off by an empirical elaboration of the implications of a politico-discursive temporality in (marriage) migration policies for the subjectivities and lived experiences of migrant mothers with a precarious residence status. When analysing their experiences of what they call 'paper stress' in light of multiple temporalities these women gave proof of patience and perseverance in confronting and navigating uncertainty and precariousness. The second part then focusses on *how exactly* this religious temporality plays a role in being patient and resilient in this specific context of marriage migration, motherhood and legal precariousness. Through an active engagement with *sabr* (perseverance) and *tawakkul* (reliance on God) these women become agents. In *taking their time* and *investing time* in having children these women find themselves in what Stronks (2017) calls a space between "legal and human time" in which they could potentially challenge a political or bureaucratic temporality in marriage migration. An important recommendation for both policy makers and future research is thus to valorize more the 'not yet' and to further explore a long-term perspective on migration.

Despite their agency and resilience the larger picture and their structurally inequal and precarious position and status often stays unaltered. In this regard I want to emphasize on both migrants wellbeing and the aspect of political violence and how these are intertwined.
I would recommend to study the mental illnesses that this bureaucratic pain and administrative violence can cause. A recommended area of research is that of mental health in this gendered context of (family) migration and integration. Despite the fact that this aspect did occasionally come up during interviews or informal conversations, it was generally not very outspoken because, as the result of existing taboos, most of them feel there is no room to (inter)personally talk about or admit these feelings. This can also be linked to how the participants see it - or are supposed to perceive it - as their 'nasib' (Lokot, 2023) meaning as a situation or Divine test they have to endure. In this sense it would be interesting to research

this tension between *tawakkul or nasib* as justifying risky action (which may bring about positive change) on the one hand and on the other hand as a means to soften this violence and pain (which may lead to maintaining political violence).

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