

## Discrimination Experienced by ‘Third-Country National’ Women Working in Malta

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### Abstract

‘Third-country national’ (TCN) women in the EU tend to experience discrimination both as women and as migrants, in the workplace and in the ‘receiving’ society. This article focuses on a recurring cluster of issues that emerged around the theme of discrimination, over the course of 19 interviews with ‘third-country national’ women from South Asian countries working in Malta. More specifically, the study explores situatedness and lived experience through an intersectional feminist approach, taking into account the individual socioeconomic conditions as well as aspects such as gender, nationality, religion, culture, educational level, and the occupation of the informants. The data was analysed using thematic analysis and led to the emergence of four key themes relating to discrimination, which proved to be interlinked: the relationship between intersecting factors; everyday discrimination; discriminatory procedures at the local and EU level; and sexual harassment. We found that workplace discrimination and broader social discriminatory practices often co-occur and are mutually reinforcing, while having an effect on the individual’s general quality of life and personal well-being. Such discrimination also interlinks with practices, power structures, and perceptions at transnational, EU, national, organisational, and local social levels.

**Keywords:** EU, migration, gender, labour studies, sexual harassment

## Introduction

There is evidence that ‘third-country national’ (TCN) women in the EU tend to face “double discrimination” in the workplace – that is, both as women and as migrants (Orav, 2023, p. 4). Research into their situation requires an intersectional approach, taking into account their individual socioeconomic conditions as well as aspects such as their gender, nationality, religion, culture, educational level, occupation, and caring responsibilities. This is in line with recent approaches, which have foregrounded “the ways in which gender is cross-cut by class, ethnicity, nationality, sexuality, age and other social variables” (Yeoh, 2014, p. 139) in everyday lived experience, where “gendered subjectivities are inextricably bound up with wider cultural struggles over resources and representations” (p. 143). Our aim was to examine the situation of TCN women working in Malta through a qualitative study, and more specifically, this article focuses on a recurring cluster of issues and concerns that emerged around the theme of discrimination over the course of 19 interviews with TCN women from South Asian countries working in Malta. Mahler and Pessar’s (2001) “gendered geographies of power” are helpful here, where gender is seen to operate on “multiple *spatial* and *social* scales (e.g., the body, the family, the state) across transnational terrains” (p. 445). “Social location” refers to “persons’ positions within power hierarchies created through historical, political, economic, geographic, kinship-based, and other socially stratifying factors” (pp. 445-6), and is particularly relevant here. While a lot has been written on women’s labour migration on the global stage (e.g. Anastasiadou et al., 2023) and at the EU level (e.g. Kofman, 2012), less attention has been given to TCN women migrating to Malta for work, with the exception of Filipino workers (e.g. Debono & Vassallo, 2020).

Our study focuses on South Asian women in Malta because there has been little research into the situations and experiences of TCN migrant workers from these countries; yet, the highest proportions of non-European migrant workers by nationality hail from the South Asian countries, with migrants from India being the most numerous and those from Nepal the third most numerous, both of which have seen a steep rise in recent years (Jobsplus, 2023). More research on the experiences of these nationality groups is therefore needed and timely. We recognise and emphasise that these ‘groups’ of TCN workers are heterogeneous groups. As Rajiva (2013, p. 17) points out, the category ‘South Asian’ may tend towards a reductively homogenising narrative, a racialising trend that may also be observed in Malta (Calleja et al., 2023, p. 35). In our study, we remain sensitive to differences across various categories (gender and nationality, as well as other intersecting factors, such as education, socioeconomic circumstances, immigration status, and work roles), while recognising some shared aspects of experience. Our research

adds to the existing literature by shedding light on an underexplored but important area of labour migration.

We employ an intersectional framework in order to better capture and interpret the experiences gathered. Our qualitative approach seeks to engage with intersectionality as “lived experience” (Valentine, 2007). An intersectional perspective “highlights the need to account for multiple grounds of identity when considering how the social world is constructed” (Crenshaw, 1991, p. 1245) and has been shown to be a particularly valuable approach in migration studies (Bastia, 2014; Erel & Reynolds, 2018).

## **EU context**

In theory, EU policy acknowledges that labour market participation is “one of the most effective and practical ways of integrating into society” (EESC, 2015, para. 5.1); however, in practice it is less straightforward, and member states’ needs (addressing labour and skill shortages) remain pivotal and decisive in the EU framework governing the labour migration of third-country nationals (Weatherburn, 2023, p. 43), empowering the state to make decisions on volume of admissions (European Parliament and Council, 2011, Art. 8(3); TFEU, 2012, Art. 79(5)). The EU ‘single permit’ binds a third-country national’s right to reside in a Member State to the single purpose of work, and is thus designed to facilitate an “instrumentalising” approach to migration (Beduschi, 2015, p. 219). Third-country nationals are likely to “be treated differently according to their skills level, family situation, country of origin, or length of residence in the host State” (p. 216) and are often perceived at state level not as “potential citizens, but rather as flexible low-wage labour” to compensate for perceived shortages (Bastia & Piper, 2019, p. 22). Despite migrant women experiencing multiple disadvantages, gender-sensitive migration policies are lacking in many receiving countries (Hennebry et al., 2017). Overall, female TCN migrant workers tend to undergo deskilling when they come to the EU, often facing barriers in finding employment commensurate with their skills and education, particularly if they have young children (Orav, 2023).

Applying for the single permit and its renewal is not always straightforward, and the procedural obstacles can leave the applicant all the more vulnerable. The process itself “can be dehumanising as there is a lack of consideration for the individual who is left waiting with no alternative means of subsistence” (Weatherburn, 2023, p. 34). Employers and potential employees alike may find the process complicated, costly and slow and may lack access to information about the procedures, TCNs’ employment rights, and their application status, among other things (Weatherburn, 2023).

The single permit does not offer prospects of permanent residence and employment, putting most TCN workers in a precarious position; in fact,

economic precarity (see Standing, 2011) and ontological precariousness (Butler, 2004) may be said to be intricately linked (Bonello and Wånggren, 2023, p. 6), with economic and contractual precarity affecting all areas of life (p. 119). For example, precariously employed workers are likelier to be exposed to sexual harassment at work (Boucher, 2025; EU Agency for Fundamental Rights, 2014, p. 111; TUC, 2016; Wånggren, 2023). Across the EU, sexual harassment at work is recognised as a recurring gender-based issue (Riso & Eurofound, 2024). This is exacerbated by migration status and job insecurity (Boucher, 2025; Villegas, 2019). Migrant women may feel too vulnerable to report such incidents, fearing a lack of protection (Villegas, 2019). The EU Agency for Fundamental Rights (2014, p. 189) also finds that migrant women experience higher rates of sexual violence. Exposure to sexual harassment and other forms of harassment is therefore likely to be exacerbated by the conditions of the single permit.

### **The Maltese Context**

Throughout much of its history, Malta saw more labour emigration than immigration (Baldacchino & Debono, 2021), with the result that immigration “was scantily regulated by Maltese law [...] up until Malta’s accession to the EU” in 2004 (Cauchi, 2018, p. 9). The Single Permit was introduced in Malta in 2014. Ten years into its implementation in the national context is a suitable point at which to take stock and get a glimpse into its impact on the everyday lives of those affected by it. Malta now has a labour-importing economy (Farrugia, 2023) and is enjoying economic prosperity. In line with the trend in the EU more generally, Malta has, in more recent years, seen a rise in migration from outside the EU, with the rise in TCN workers exceeding that of EU citizen workers (Debono, 2021, p. 276).

However, socially pervasive attitudes include a rise in racism and anti-immigration sentiment (Cassar, 2023; Cummings, 2024), also filtering into the workplace (see e.g. Cachia, 2024, focusing on the construction sector), which can make Malta a hostile destination for migrants. The diverging attitudes to migrants in Malta create a climate that is inclusive “on the surface”, “supported by an economic logic that markets plurality”, but which masks “everyday bordering practices that serve to reproduce the racial/ethnic order and boundaries of belonging within the nation state” (Pisani, 2022, p. 146) – a tension reinforced by government policy that values migrants primarily as a temporary workforce. This is reminiscent of the tensions Baldacchino (2012) observed in another small island context, Prince Edward Island. Baldacchino offers some explanations for the chilly reception of migrants on the island, connecting it to its post-colonial context. Malta is likewise a post-colonial small island state, and may be subject to similar tensions, with a tendency to reproduce hierarchies and exclusionary practices.

There is also discrimination within the category of migrant workers. Sangare's study of migrant women in Malta found a disparity between TCN status and EU citizenship, as perceived by her respondents. On the one hand, EU citizenship was experienced as "an asset and gate-opener for mobility, work, access to rights and increased acceptance by Maltese people;" and on the other, TCN status was often associated with "additional legal and practical, every day challenges" (Sangare, 2019, p. 83). As noted by Debono (2021), TCNs face a number of challenges "in their quest for decent work" in Malta; for example, TCNs earn around 17% less than the average local salary (Agius et al., 2024, p. 11). This mirrors the tendency across the EU, with non-EU migrants being "more vulnerable to discrimination" than EU migrants (Benedí Lahuerta, 2009, p. 755).

Cauchi (2018) observes that there is also differential treatment within the broader category of TCN workers in the procedures for entry, favouring workers deemed to be 'highly-skilled', who also receive more protection under Malta's laws. This unequal treatment is experienced at the level of procedure and access to rights. The different categories of TCN workers include: highly-qualified workers, represented in Malta by the 'Key Employee Initiative', the EU Blue Card, the 'Specialist Employee Initiative' (Identità Malta, 2025), and intra-corporate transferees. All other third-country nationals fall under the Single Permit Directive 2011/98/EU The 2024 recast Directive (European Parliament and Council, 2024) has not yet been transposed into Maltese law.

The Single Permit is tied to a specific employment and employer (Identità Malta, 2023). This significantly increases the worker's dependence on their employer, and could be seen as a form of "status coercion" (Hatton, 2020), where the workers' legal status and right to reside is at the mercy of their employer, exacerbating the risk of exploitation. The employee is effectively the one punished when loss of employment occurs, even if it is the fault of the employer. For example, in Malta, workers suffered the consequences of the government's "crackdown" on "abusive" employers, with their permit applications being denied or not renewed (Carabott, 2024). At the time of the interviews, if terminated from employment, a TCN person had 10 days (3 months in the case of blue card holders) to find other employment (Identità Malta, 2024a), beyond which their immigration status would fall into 'irregularity'. This renders their situation more precarious, since their jobs lack security and stability.

As Beduschi (2015) notes, the single permit's restrictions on work as an economic right also compromise the right to work as a human right. EU citizens and TCN job applicants do not have equal access to employment. Noting that TCNs are only likely to stay in Malta short-term, Clyde Caruana, the current Minister for Finance and Employment, declared: "We will

prioritise Maltese workers. If we can't find enough Maltese nationals to fill vacancies, we will look across the EU, as is the norm" (Martin, 2017). There are moves to cap the arrival of non-EU workers (Carabott, 2024); and the Government has also introduced skills cards for migrant workers (Arena, 2023; Xuereb, 2023) in hospitality/tourism, which come with a fee, creating yet another barrier for migrants. Meanwhile, growing resistance to TCN persons cuts across partisan lines. The opposition party has also proposed plans to limit "excessive" population growth that include restricted work permits, requiring migrant workers to learn Maltese, and compiling a skills database for the "continuous assessment of skills and participation" (Times of Malta, 2023).

This needs-based approach is often supported by, and in its turn fuels, attitudes in the receiving society. In Baldacchino's study of attitudes towards labour migration in the comparable island context of Prince Edward Island, respondents felt "distrusted and discriminated against; valued just for the money they inject into the local economy, and welcomed only as long as they are temporarily servicing the local labor market" (2012, p. 149). This conditional welcome is indeed likewise an attitude that seems to characterise government policy in Malta, as well as being held by a vocal segment of the public (see Cassar, 2023; Pisani, 2022).

As Rajiva (2013) notes (with reference to South Asian migrants in Canada), the perceptions and attitudes they are subjected to may come to characterise a shared aspect of experience. In Malta, South Asian peoples are regularly targeted by dehumanising hate speech (Calleja et al., 2023, p. 36), subjected to both discrimination in the workplace and public "disdain for [their] basic rights" (p. 58). South and Southeast Asian people also face more hurdles: the migration procedures across origin and destination countries are lengthy (Ellul, 2023a); Bangladeshi applicants for example have a low chance of receiving a visa, with Bangladeshi sources reporting that "only around 20% of visa applicants are successful" after a process that typically takes 1.5 years (Ellul, 2023b).

Discrimination in the workplace on the grounds of gender, race, and ethnicity may be systemic and/or individualised, as well as institutional, and often reflects and is reinforced by social values outside the workplace (Borg, 2019). Women, immigrants, and disabled persons are likelier to be subjected to bullying in the workplace (bBrave, 2023, pp. 41-2). The bBrave study conducted in Malta finds that women labour under a social perception of their "fragility" and "emotional" sensitivity, making them likelier targets for bullies. Immigrant workers may be bullied due to stereotypes associated with their country of origin, and they are treated differently depending on where they are from. For example, "if an Indian employee receives a promotion, this

would cause problems and complaints amongst employees, while the same would not hold for a German employee” (bBrave, 2023, pp. 41-2).

Yet some of Sangare’s (2019, p. 82) respondents experienced workplaces in Malta as being mostly “exempt of overt discrimination.” However, reports of racial discrimination as well as “racially-stereotyped sexual harassment” in the workplace were more common among those working in lower-paid jobs and more industrialised environments, and more common among non-EU than EU citizen workers. According to Sangare, this “seems to suggest that the socio-economic class intersects with race to create specific situations of discrimination against migrant women” (2019, p. 82). Particular nationalities have also come to be associated with certain sectors, which in turn influences what kinds of jobs they are likely to get (Debono, 2021, p. 277). Migrant women globally are also likelier than migrant men to be working in so-called ‘feminised’ sectors, where jobs tend to be more precarious and lower-paid (Bastia & Piper, 2019).

“Everyday discrimination”, understood as racism encountered in their daily lives (Erel & Reynolds, 2018), was however, more widely reported than was discrimination specifically centring on the workplace (Sangare, 2019, p. 81). As Bastia and Piper (2019, p. 26) note, the effects of racist attitudes on daily life and well-being are insidious and pervasive, including an impact on “socioeconomic and psychological well-being.”

In the Maltese context, victims of sexual harassment (including Maltese persons) feel social pressure to endure sexual harassment silently: “The microaggression they meet daily, pushes them to learn to brush it off to cope in Maltese society” (Cutajar & Vassallo, 2024, p. 119). More than 27% of women have been found to have experienced sexual harassment in the workplace in Malta over the course of their working life; women accounted for more than two-thirds of those who experienced such harassment at work (NSO, 2024, p. 17). TCN migrant women in particular often feel too unprotected and fearful of the repercussions (such as the possibility of losing their jobs) to report harassment (Agius et al., 2024, p. 47).

The trauma of sexual harassment may be compounded by its cultural implications in the country of origin (COO). For example, Bélanger and Rahman (2013, p. 361) note that there was a stigma attached to Bangladeshi women’s migration for work, leading to the assumption that they were likely to have been sexually harassed by their employers, or that they were involved in prostitution to earn money while abroad. Victim-blaming is commonplace in some South Asian countries (Shahid et al., 2021), including India (Vijayalakshmi et al., 2022) and Bangladesh (Huq & Mortada, 2020), discouraging victims from speaking out. Gendered victim-blaming is also frequently encountered in the Maltese context (Borg, 2024; Cutajar & Vassallo, 2024, p. 120; European Commission, 2024).

## Methodology

This cross-sectional qualitative study is based on 19 semi-structured in-depth interviews conducted with South Asian women coming from India (9), Nepal (4), Sri Lanka (3), Pakistan (2) and Bangladesh (1), with the aim of gaining better understanding of their work experience in Malta, focusing on the single permit conditions and on the intersection between gender and immigration status. Respondents were recruited via a call issued over social media channels, including the Facebook page of Expats Malta and TCN Malta, as well as through other networks. In order to protect the informants, pseudonyms are used and their role is categorised in broad terms. The interview questions were open-ended and semi-structured, focusing on their work experience, the support they received, and the barriers they encountered, including challenges or incidents of discrimination they may have faced as women and as migrants at work and more generally. This gave the participants the opportunity to tell their stories in their own words and with their own emphases, enabling the inductive emergence of identifiable themes. Our interpretative lens was intersectional.

The face-to-face interviews were conducted in 2023 and 2024 and lasted between 30 and 75 minutes. The recorded data were transcribed, then coded through NVivo and analysed using Thematic Analysis (Braun & Clarke, 2006).

We self-reflexively acknowledge our own expectations and positioning as researchers (Braun & Clarke, 2019), as well as the relationship of reciprocity that characterised the interviews. We recognise that our position as European researchers entails a degree of privilege - for example, simply by being EU citizens, we have certain automatic rights that our respondents may struggle to access or assert. The framework provided by our literature review and our contextualising research enabled us to interpret our findings in a way that tested their validity through their consistency in the light of previous findings. The interviews were transcribed verbatim and in full, enabling the researchers to gain close familiarity with the data. Two authors independently took stock of the themes and their analysis. To further ensure validity, the coding of themes was checked and discussed over several meetings, and an agreement was reached. The findings were then discussed among all the authors.

We aimed to create a safe space for our respondents by inviting them to choose the place and time of the interview. Where additional detail was provided that was felt to be particularly sensitive or that may make the respondents identifiable, we provide additional anonymity by not specifying the particular informant. Our qualitative approach followed the tradition of feminist approaches that focus on the enabling of voices and the sharing of lived experience (Kelly et al., 1994), recognising our informants as

knowledge-holders (Bruce et al., 2016). Through this study, we endeavoured to provide a channel for communication, since such channels are often limited by intersecting vulnerabilities. The study received ethics clearance from the University of Malta. All of the participants who volunteered were women in their 20s or 30s at the time of the interviews, and were working in a variety of sectors. These included higher-income administrative, management, and/or corporate roles, and lower-income roles in sectors such as hospitality, retail, or health care. In many cases, they were overqualified for their role or were working in a role that did not match their educational background and experience.

## **Findings and Discussion**

The majority of our respondents were in Malta on the single permit, although a couple were on intra-company transfers and one was on the Key Employee Initiative. As noted by Cauchi (2018), the latter were relatively more privileged. We found that discrimination, in line with Mahler and Pessar's (2001) observations, cuts across all levels: the everyday, as well as the national and transnational (EU, global) levels. Most experiences were mixed, rather than either wholly good or bad. The themes relating to discrimination broadly fall into four areas: (1) observations on the relationship between intersecting factors (including race, gender, and religion) as perceived by the respondents; (2) everyday discrimination; (3) discriminatory procedures; (4) sexual harassment as a theme that demonstrably connects the other themes and shows how they interact and intermesh.

### **Discrimination: Intersectionality as perceived by respondents**

Among our respondents, there were more complaints of discrimination on the basis of race, nationality, and ethnicity than on the basis of gender. In answer to whether she had experienced gender discrimination as a woman, Radha said: "No [...]. Maybe I didn't realise it, or I don't remember, maybe." Likewise, Amina felt that she is "identified mostly as a Brown person," rather than as a woman. She argued: "I have never faced any issue because of [being a woman], but I would say there has been bullying or harassment because I am Pakistani." However, on reflecting further she said that she hadn't really considered that angle before being asked:

I think I identified mostly as a Brown person, you know. So, I thought whatever issues [were] happening were mostly because I'm a person of colour working in, or living in Malta. There were a lot of racial incidents but I don't know if it's because I'm a woman or because of who I am. [...] I mostly just identified as my ethnicity, my colour more than my gender. [...]

Your question just rattled me, like oh my god I'm experiencing it as a woman.

In this regard, it is worth noting that gender discrimination may be so 'normalised' that it goes unrecognised. An intersectional approach cautions us against positing a clear and simple binary separation between gender and racial discrimination, as these are often interlinked (Nash, 2008), although one may appear more prominent at a given time.

While reports of racism were rather more common, some respondents claimed to have had a more liberating experience in terms of gender, compared to their home country. For example, Muiya (Nepal) spoke about her positive experience as a woman working in Malta. She claimed that: "Here is a different culture [...], here is freedom." Sangita, from Nepal, added that in Malta: "Women can do everything," commenting that she usually feels safe as a woman in Malta during the daytime. Habiba also recounted how her experience as a woman in Malta differed from her experience in Pakistan:

When I came here, it was really very surprising for me, that here men and women they are working in the same environment, [doing the] same [jobs], and everything for them is equal and the same. [...] Here, as a woman, no, I didn't find any difficulty. Women are driving, they are in every field of life, so I observed them, that they are serving and working on the same [team] like men, so [...] my experience is not bad.

Habiba however, was also the only one of our respondents who explicitly mentioned discrimination on the basis of religion.<sup>1</sup> She was offered a job (while her looks were objectified) on condition that she removes her hijab on the job. However, she did not want to do so, and she encountered rejections because of this. When she applied for a part-time job in the hospitality sector, the manager

saw me and he admired me a lot – "oh you are really very beautiful, wow," and when I asked him for a part-time, [at] the same time he offered, "Yes, why not? [...] From tomorrow or this evening, if you want to come." And when I [told him], "OK, I need to cover my head, at least" – "no, no, no, you cannot, you cannot." I said [...] "like only if I cover my hair up, until here, at least – like [...] a cap." He said "no."

In this particular experience, religious and cultural differences intersected with gender.

One respondent reported that she was assigned to a job by her agency, and when she arrived, she realised that the employer was expecting a male

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<sup>1</sup> Joppke (2014) suggests that Muslims face particular challenges in Europe, and there are moreover reports of rising Islamophobia (Kassam, 2024).

worker. The employer gave her the same tasks regardless, which involved manual loading and unloading of heavy goods, despite the health and safety implications. This incident shows the intersection of gender and working conditions specific to TCN migrants, where TCNs might be entirely dependent on an agency for assigning them – often inappropriately and not gender-sensitively – to jobs with no regard for individual skills and capabilities.

### **Everyday Discrimination**

Many respondents reported everyday low-simmering discrimination that they found difficult to pinpoint, such as unequal opportunities at work. In Indira's (India) experience: "it's not something direct, [...] but behind the curtain it's still there: the discrimination, the racism and everything." For some, the experience was pervasive, both in and out of the workplace: "You still, at the end of the day, get those people who don't like you for the way you look, or for the colour of your skin, or for the way you talk. It's not something limited I would say to the workplace or to outside – it is what it is" (Gayatri, India).

The more direct discrimination experienced by our respondents in the workplace included being paid later than one's co-workers in the catering sector (Muiya); being denied a job because of the hijab (Habiba); receiving abusive racist comments from patients under one's care (Nisha, a nurse from India; and Habiba), or from customers in retail.

Nisha described racism at work: "sometimes the patients will [say] 'fuck Indians go back' [...] but we can accept all those things," because "I think a lot of third nationals are coming and some people, they do not like us;" but she believes that the large majority of Maltese people accept TCNs. Habiba described an experience with an elderly patient: "he was confused but he was still in his senses. He was saying, 'Oh my god, you fucking people coming from other countries,' and I just turned and I said, 'Yes, because we are paying tax as well'." While Habiba spoke up for her rights, Radha felt unable to respond to racist customers in her previous job in retail. Originally from Nepal, she was in more stable employment in health care at the time of the interview, although she had previously worked for an agency that would move her between jobs. She said:

I meet a lot of people who are bad, and who are good as well, you know. In [some] moments, [...] I was like "why did I come to Malta?" I had that feeling [...] for some time, but I'm better now, better than before, for now it's ok, it's going well; but before it was very hard for me to adjust here, far from family, and even, you know, when working. [...] But some places, it was [a] disaster! [...] Usually you know, to be honest there [is] a lot of discrimination as well, because we are from a 'third

country', and [...] sometimes are too different. Some people [EU citizens], they treat us as though we are not humans.

The experience of racism is dehumanising, and again, its impact was felt beyond the workplace, having an effect on Radha's mental wellbeing and quality of life (see Bastia & Piper, 2019, p. 26). Radha acknowledged that there is good mixed in with the bad. However, she highlighted one incident in particular where a male customer entered the shop she was working in, and he directly tells me, "If I were prime minister of this country, I would kick out all of you from this country." He was [speaking] directly into my face, you know, I was like "What?" [...] Because he was [a] customer, I can't tell him anything as well.

She noted that the experience is typical, albeit one of the worst she's experienced: "This kind of situation to be honest, we face a lot. [...] The way they treat you Maltese is different, and the way they treat us is different." Amina, who worked for a time in retail and catering, likewise experienced hostility from customers. On the other hand, Razia used to work in retail, and testified to such attitudes among managers. She witnessed one manager speaking "with others like [they were] Asian monkeys, but I'm standing beside him, I'm also Asian." He seemed to have forgotten or disregarded her presence, while he was complaining "that they can't speak English, blah blah blah. But I was also standing as an Asian representative there."

Chandani (Sri Lanka) linked social attitudes to her right to work:

Just think of us as humans. [...] I didn't come uninvitedly, I was invited, I came through a proper channel. Just because of my colour, the way I dress, the way I look – don't judge me with that. Just, I'm doing a proper job. [...] [We] are here because there was no one to do that job, [...] respect us.

Our findings align with Sangare's conclusion that discrimination is more common in lower-paid jobs than in higher-paid jobs. A number of our respondents who worked in retail and catering experienced some kind of discrimination rooted in daily practices. There was also a greater sense of vulnerability in such sectors. For example, the fear of losing her job held Sabina, a Nepalese woman working in retail, back from claiming more sick leave: "I took the day I got sick and the next day.... And he, the doctor ask me: 'you want more days?' and I said: 'if I take more then maybe he will fire me.'" Such presenteeism (such as working while ill) has been found to be more common among those who lack job security (Fiorini, 2024).

Conversely, those who were working in better-paid jobs in private multinational companies with a multicultural organisational culture, ethos, and composition, such as Maneet (India), Leela (India), Indira (India), Chandani (Sri Lanka), and Rashmika (Sri Lanka), were more aware of where to go within the organisation to assert their rights and more willing to exercise them.

They also claimed to have experienced very “welcoming” and “accommodating” workplace environments (Maneet), where “they treat everyone equally” (Leela). Maneet made the point that supportive structures at work make a significant difference: “my human resources department is very involved in these kind of matters, they are very assuring. If I have any problems with sexism or racism I can go to them.” Rashmika said she was working in a global financial institution where: “there is more of a speak-up culture and very diverse and inclusive I would say, that’s what they [brand themselves as] most of the time.”

While it is important to note that the kind of workplace and job does indeed make a difference, it is also crucial to bear in mind that organisations are often “constructed” as “gender neutral” (Acker, 1990; Kelan, 2009), which may actually invisibilise – but not eliminate – gender discrimination. In line with Kelan’s (2009) findings, most of our respondents who claimed that there was no or little gender discrimination in their corporate workplaces acknowledged that it was a possibility, that it could occur as an exceptional or isolated incident, or that it had happened in the past. While it may indeed be rarer in some working environments than in others, this perception may also be indicative of what Kelan (2009) terms “gender fatigue”: where the organisational culture’s claim to be gender-blind is mostly accepted, and the possibility of gender discrimination is considered as a rare deviation from the norm, rather than an endemic tendency.

Education may also make a difference. Razia, who has been through tertiary education and could compare different sectors (moving from a job she was overqualified for, to one more closely matching her qualifications), hypothesised that education level affects the way one may be treated as a woman: “because I think education matters sometimes, [whether] you are women or men.” She went on to specify however: “Especially for women – when they see women educated and a bit, like, vocal, they are kind of afraid to do something.” However, the impact of education was not as manifest as might be expected, and should not be overestimated: it is important to note that most of our respondents in lower-paid jobs were educationally overqualified for their roles (see also Orav, 2023). Working in administration, Amina (who has been through higher education) has avoided such “exploitation workplace-wise, [...] but I also know people that go through these issues where they’re exploited.”

Amina (Pakistan) reported everyday prejudices outside the workplace, for example in relation to assumptions about food:

my landlord strictly instructed me not to cook in the flat because he said the food I would make would leave a smell in his windows and his walls. Insinuating that South Asian food stinks.

On one occasion, when she offered some homemade food to a neighbour, the latter immediately said:

“Please do not cook in your house because there’s another Indian person living here and their food smells really bad.” So, first I’m identified as an Indian which I really don’t like, because I’m obviously from a different country and second, there’s this prejudice or bias attached to it.

She also reported feeling rebuffed through more subtle social signals, such as avoidance of direct engagement and eye contact. For example, referring to a local individual she said:

he would refuse to talk to me, he just talks to my friend who’s white. [...] It’s really hard to explain in words when there’s this body language of people when they don’t want to be friends with you or don’t want to talk to you.

Habiba heard explicitly disdainful comments about her hijab: “some people [say], ‘Oh, it’s very hot; why are you covering your head? You have to remove [it], my God, Madonna!’” More positively, she also claimed that she has encountered Maltese people who “appreciated” her and told her that: “‘with this modern world, you didn’t change yourself, you didn’t leave your ethics’.” Habiba admitted that such comments encouraged her and boosted her morale.

Like Nisha, Mehar (India) observed that there has been an increase in TCNs, and offered a contextualising explanation for the change in social attitudes: “when I came here in 2016, I felt the people [...] until 2018 or 2019 [...] were quite happy here, they were welcoming foreigners. [...] I felt happy. But after 2019, a lot of foreigners have come,” and attitudes shifted. A couple of respondents commented that the perceptions associating nationalities with certain jobs (as also observed by Debono, 2021, p. 277) have been over-generalised to become stereotypes, influencing perceptions. Again however, the workplace cannot be clearly separated from the broader social context: workplace and social attitudes intersect and reinforce each other, sometimes affecting the types of jobs most readily available (Debono, 2021). This is the case even with those whose skills and qualifications would qualify them for a higher-paid role, but who have not arrived on a programme for highly-skilled workers (the latter have an advantage in this regard, gaining immediate access to higher-paid jobs). Amina offered an explanation relating to a perceived tendency to reproduce colonial power relations in the post-colonial environment of an ex-colony (also noted by Baldacchino, 2012):

I don’t mean they’re taking over those jobs. I mean I feel like white people or regular European people don’t want to do those jobs because they feel it’s beneath them. I understand where

it's coming from, because Pakistan is also a colonial country so I feel like it's a colonial mindset.

Mehar encountered assumptions and stereotypes at odds with her managerial role:

Most [TCNs] are in the [lower-paid] labour category so the respect for foreigners [is] bad at the moment. Somebody sees me and asks, 'Are you a nurse?' And they see my husband and ask, 'Are you a chef?' So it's like anybody that comes with this colour, they make assumptions. [...] I do understand but then I don't like that.

Mehar's experience demonstrates that assumptions may be flawed, and that they operate along both gendered and racial lines.

### **Discrimination in Procedures**

Discrimination tends to restrict TCNs' exercise of and access to their rights. Discrimination is in some respects "institutionalised" (Suban & Zammit, 2019): built into the system, including in the EU single permit procedure. For example, the procedures for recognising TCNs' qualifications in Malta have been described by Suban and Zammit (2019, p. 117) as "opaque, dilatory and discretionary." Gayatri commented on the mismatch between skills and available jobs, and the barriers to recognising qualifications and previous work experience:

It's not just in Malta. It's something that's [...] EU. Because when a TCN comes in, we start afresh. Even though I had the two years' experience in India, it's [...] not taken in consideration [for] the working permit. [...] My fiancé, [...] is just finishing his thesis for his Masters degree, and he had experience. [...] He did not even get a response for the applications he sent in, not even a rejection, and he applied for like at least 75 jobs.

Those working in health care pointed out the barriers to working as a nurse in Malta; many start off as a carer or cleaner, even if they were qualified as a nurse in their country of origin. They are required to complete a bridging course to be recognised as nurses in Malta. Despite its rationale in terms of aligning training and expectations, this considerably lengthens the procedure for entering the relevant job market, in comparison to the experience of EU citizens.

Mention was made of the administration of required procedures such as biometrics (related to identity verification), where one Indian respondent reported being left waiting in the queue as "whiter-looking" people were ushered in before her. Another respondent described an unwelcoming environment at the government agency ID Malta: "I go inside, [...] they start

speaking in Maltese, it becomes more anxiety-inducing for me and I'm like, 'I'm getting out of here'." Several respondents had to deal with bureaucratic issues in order to get administrative errors fixed on their permits. One described a situation where she went to the ID Malta offices to ask for a correction to be made on her permit, and instead of resolving the problem, the person there threatened to call the police on her. The next day, she returned with her white flatmate: "she does all the talking and I just go inside [...] and as soon as they see someone who's white, their whole body language and everything changes."

Amina noted that discriminatory treatment and delays are sometimes an outcome of the procedures, rather than ill-intention on the employer's side:

The management [...] were a bit confused as well because they didn't know how to handle a case like this and they were leaving me a bit hanging. I do think that when it comes to [...] dealing with paperwork and legalities people don't know how to deal with third-party nationals.

This points to a lack of transparency within the system, as also noted by Weatherburn (2023), who found that employers were sometimes uninformed, and unwilling or ill-prepared to engage with the convoluted procedures. Gayatri encountered delays due to lack of communication between her employer and ID Malta:

I basically can't work, if I don't have the permit; I have to just stay at home and there's nobody funding me anyway, they are not paying while we wait for the permit; and I understand – legally, they can't let me work until I get the permit.

Procedural delays in the application for renewal of the permit were experienced by several other respondents, which put their rights on hold. Chandani's employer, a private company, handles the process, which makes it smoother. However, she experienced a series of delays when a recurring administrative error compromised the validity of her renewed permit. She pointed out that without a valid ID, she does not have access to health care, and she cannot travel. Rashmika also encountered an administrative error, and was unhelpfully told to wait till the next renewal. She noted that these errors are frequent: "Sometimes – not sometimes, quite often – there are mistakes that happen as well. Like, on the card they issue." The error was resolved after someone from her private company liaised with ID Malta on her behalf. Despite this supportive intermediary, a safety-net unavailable to many of our respondents, Rashmika said that every time she had to make changes she encountered new procedural hurdles:

every time it's so difficult whenever I have to go through my renewal process [...] You have to wait for travel plans and wait

until after you get the ID, because you can't travel without it.

[...] The process [...] is the main challenge.

Likewise, Leela recounted her experience of chasing ID Malta, since her application for renewal was still pending: "[ID Malta] didn't respond to the emails; and I called them, I sent an email every day. [...] Because without that, I can't receive my salary; without the card, I can't work here." Leela also went to ID Malta in-person, and was told "it's with third parties; we can't do anything." She observes that they already had all the information since she'd already been in Malta for a few years, so she assumed "a basic check" was all that would be needed: "It's just a renewal; it took ages." In the meantime, while it was being processed: "if something happens, I can't do anything. I'm stuck here." She observes, "I think it's a really common problem for third country nationals." This is borne out by the number of similar stories that emerged in the interviews. One respondent pointed out that it could take several months to renew the permit after a change of designated role. Chandani observed that difficulties have increased over the years: "At the beginning it was very straightforward and it was easy back then, in 2017. [...] The process was simpler, even though they had a lot of paperwork – even for a renewal [...]. Now, they have changed. I think they have changed it in a more complicated way."

Razia commented on the way these application procedures and delays empower the employer and enable exploitation: "You know, it's waste of time, waste of money, and [your] employer can play with you." Such dependence on the employer exacerbates the precarity and vulnerability that TCNs on the single permit are subject to, as noted by Weatherburn (2023), creating the conditions for "status coercion" (Hatton, 2020).

Several of our respondents encountered insurmountable difficulties in bringing their family members over (see Bonello et al, 2025), because they were unable to reach the required income threshold of average wage plus 20% per family member (Identità Malta, 2024b), which is higher than in many other EU member states (EMN, 2017). A couple of respondents in higher-paid jobs had succeeded, but one had found reaching the threshold to be a "long tiring process." Those TCNs who are here as 'highly-skilled' workers (e.g. on the Key Employee Initiative) or through intra-company transfer were found to be relatively more privileged, reinforcing Cauchi's observations (2018) – for example, they were likelier to report receiving institutional support in navigating permit procedures; and they achieved family reunification with less difficulty.

## **Sexual Harassment**

A number of respondents reported encountering what they described as "flirting" behaviour, but some viewed it as harmless. However, Sabina's

comments show how easily this can border on something more threatening: “boys they want to flirt with us, [...] not like harass but they want to come close with us, like joking, you know.” She sometimes speaks out directly, telling them to go their own way. She found such unwanted attention to be particularly rampant in housekeeping work, but says her refusals were respected: “They want to try their luck, but if we are [...] not comfortable [...] they move.” Yet Sabina was not at ease, expressing a sense of general apprehension and distrust: “I feel scared. Yes, definitely here I feel scared. To talk with, especially, the boys.”

While Sangita mostly feels safe – particularly in her domestic work environment, looking after an elderly woman – she acknowledged that she does not feel safe walking alone at night as a woman, especially after she sees social media posts about women being murdered or bullied. Sabina’s feelings are likewise ambivalent - she describes a bad occurrence as a “good thing”, out of relief that a worse situation has been averted:

another [...] good thing about Malta is [as a] foreigner whenever we are walking late [at] night, especially, this area, they [boys] come and tell us: “Hey girl, do you want coffee?”, they say. “No sorry, I no drink coffee.” [...] They stop when not interested, they stop. That’s the best thing I liked.

Though she should not have to be engaging with such unwanted invitations, the effort fell to her to fend off these advances. She interpreted her experience in the intersectional light of being both a woman and a “foreigner”.

While working temporarily in retail, one respondent encountered a manager who “was trying to touch me inappropriately, which is not acceptable in my culture.” The participant stood up for herself and lost the job: “they just removed me from the position because I complained against that particular person.” She subsequently found a much better job and notes that apart from that one experience, “everyone respected me, to be honest. They didn't count me as a woman, they respected what I have in my head and what I have [in] my background.” She factored in education and the type of job, and the financial support she had from her family. She contrasted this with even less secure positions: “I think if I was a cleaner it [would] be different; if I was a waitress [there would] be different stories, I believe.” As noted in the literature (Boucher 2025; EU Agency for Fundamental Rights 2014, 111; Wånggren 2023), precarious working conditions intersect with gender to increase vulnerability to sexual harassment.

Another respondent, who was indeed working as a cleaner, reported a similar experience where speaking up also backfired on her and had even worse repercussions, because she had fewer options and support in terms of finding a new job. She described an incident that occurred while cleaning in the workplace, when “one of the employees tried to take advantage” of her.

She reported this to management, who preferred to handle it internally. Management eventually decided to let go the alleged perpetrator, “after a long period” of discussion. Her account did not end there, however:

But then later on, you know, everybody has had this impression about me, [...] it was like, either I should not have spoken up, or kept it to myself. [...] Later on [...], it was not easy for me to work in that environment, because every time I did, it brought [on] like this really bad memory.

The aftermath was felt on two levels: a change in attitudes towards her and her lingering trauma after the event. She experienced the workplace becoming an unsafe space, and was then subjected to doubt and victim-blaming. She felt that while the male employee found support in some quarters, her story was not taken equally seriously:

[I] felt like, unsure what’s happening. [...] Because the other employees were coming and asking, “Are you sure you didn’t do anything to him?” [...] They were actually thinking of bringing him back; and I said, “No, I don’t feel safe.” [...] My supervisor was [telling team leaders], “Hey, you know, take him, give him another chance.”

She then voiced concern about the effects of sexual harassment on her own status in her culture, and what this might mean for her “marriageability”:

Usually, in a [COO] love triangle, when the girl is touched by another guy, it feels like, you know something is wrong – it feels like you know, like she’s dirty, like she’s not clean, you know. So he’s like, “how am I going to tell my family?”, and stuff like that. [...] I don’t know, we might even call off the engagement, I don’t know, he’s like, “I don’t know whether I want to be with you anymore.”

In addition to the further victimisation these victims encountered at their place of work in Malta, sexual harassment may also have cultural implications in their COO (as noted above) which put an added burden on the victim.

Sexual harassment relates to all thematic categories: intersectional vulnerabilities increased its likelihood; unwelcome advances were experienced as a commonplace everyday event; and those who experienced sexual harassment in the workplace found that their channels for redress were restricted, where procedures and policy failed to protect them.

## Conclusions

This study offers insights into the discriminatory practices affecting TCN migrant women in Malta, through the stories and testimonies of those who have experienced them. Though some respondents saw gender and

migration status as distinct factors, others indicated the ways in which they intersect, for example, in the case of sexual harassment. One could also note discrimination happening at multiple levels - EU, transnational, state, organisational, social and personal – which interact structurally, as well as converging in individual cases. The impact of the power structures is also intersectional, with respondents experiencing discrimination on several grounds, sometimes simultaneously. The inequality is also systemic, experienced both in everyday practices and procedurally. Although some respondents drew a distinction between their experiences in and outside the workplace, other respondents sensed something more pervasive that could not be so easily identified as pertaining exclusively to particular domains. Both everyday discrimination and discriminatory procedures are not confined to one area of life (e.g., work vs living conditions), but permeate various aspects of lived experience and have an impact on the general quality of life and personal well-being. This is exemplified in the nature of the EU single permit, where residence is bound up with work as the purpose of migration, and where work precarity directly translates into precarity of livelihood, the right to reside, and increased vulnerability. This vulnerability also threatens to silence voices. In fact, none of our respondents were union members. This vulnerability may be further heightened by other factors, and further research is needed on discrimination along different intersections, e.g., with disability and age. Some communities were more difficult to reach than others, so the participants who responded to the call were likelier to come from more established and sizable communities. Those who responded to our call were all in their 20s and 30s, leaving the voices of older women unheard. Our perspective as researchers was also coloured by our relative privilege as Maltese nationals; while we actively sought out TCN workers' voices and lived experiences, one direction for further research would be to include TCNs as co-researchers. By giving glimpses into the lived experiences of TCN women working in Malta, focusing on South Asian women, we hope to lay the basis for comparative approaches (e.g., with other migrant communities) not covered in the course of this study.

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