

11. “Already emancipated”? Queer refugee women in the Netherlands, dirty labor and the paradox of respectability

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INTRODUCTION

“You need to work in *Zorg* (caregiving or nursing) or we might cut your *uitkering* (unemployment benefits).” This was the pointed response provided to Shathouma by the social worker at her local municipality. Understanding this “advice” as the threat it was intended to be, Shathouma explains that this answer was an attempt to (re)direct her toward jobs typically associated and assigned to Syrian women in the Netherlands.

Shathouma is a queer¹ Syrian-Palestinian refugee from Damascus in her early 30s who sought asylum in the Netherlands via the Greek corridor. Shathouma and I initially met several years ago through the queer Arab scene in Europe. When she arrived in the Netherlands in 2015, it was relatively feasible for Syrians to be granted refugee status despite the generally long processing times. Although mentioning her sexual identity could have expedited her asylum process, she chose not to disclose it at any point in the process. When I asked her why, she explained that she didn’t want to “exploit” an LGBTI identity with which she did not feel a strong connection. She elaborated that this reluctance also stemmed from concerns about privacy and the requirements to provide unreasonable proof, as well as the fact that queerphobic violence was not the reason she fled Syria. Instead, she chose to apply for asylum as a Syrian fleeing the violence that followed the 2011 Syrian uprising, as this dangerous environment of ongoing devolving violence was the actual reason she was forced to flee her home. When I asked her about her use of the word “exploit,”

¹ I use the terms “queer”, “bisexual” and “lesbian” interchangeably in this article.

it became clear that these choices reflect Shathouma's critiques of a simplistic Western narrative about Syrian queerness that foregrounds a system of LGBTI asylum-seeking based on ill-informed tropes and sexual identification. She ultimately finds it problematic that this framing is obsessed with stories of suffering related to Arab queerness given that it presumes every queer Syrian has experienced and been victimized by queerphobic violence. She also publicly expresses a stronger alignment with the Palestinian liberation movement than with an LGBTI politics based on rights.

Shathouma is unapologetic about her self-identification as a nonconformist and disreputable woman. She shared with me that during her stay at the AZC (*Asielzoekerscentrum*, Asylum Seekers' Center), these characteristics meant that she faced derogatory remarks and gossip from other refugees at the center. One woman criticized her for not wearing a bra and others called her a *sharmouta* (slut), mainly because she arrived alone, unmarried, without a male guardian, and had no plans for family reunification with a husband or fiancé who remained in Syria.

These recollections span the whole of Shathouma's refugee experiences in the Netherlands, from living at an AZC upon arrival to her successful obtaining of residency, including her Dutch integration process and dealings with the labor market, as well as her political perspectives. Her experiences echo those of many of the other queer refugee women interviewed for this project. These stories have led me to ask the following questions: How can we make sense of the tendency by Dutch state officials to steer lesbian refugees towards jobs specifically in the reproductive labor sector? Are lesbian refugees interpellated and treated differently than straight ones? Why do some queer refugees outwardly reject the Western framework of LGBTI rights struggle?

These guiding questions emerged from the field and led me to explore my primary research focus of respectability through a case study on lesbian refugees in the Netherlands, particularly how Dutch state discourses and policies governing queer Arab women refugees affect their experiences and their relation to labor. Using respectability as an analytical tool will help understand the systemic basis of common experiences like integration officials directing refugee women towards certain precarious jobs and forms of work, a tendency reported by many of my interlocutors in the Netherlands. When understood in the context of the Dutch and European LGBTI asylum regimes and the racist, Islamophobic, and classist expectations around LGBTI identification and "rights," we can see the tendency above is but one of several state tactics deployed via the asylum process as part of a system that necessitates assimilation into European national citizenship, which itself is a mechanism of a moral nature. I offer and propose that respectability is a modality that operates through two processes: rendering social reproductive labor devalued and

constructing it as dirty work² and mobilizing sexual and gender politics in the admission to a proper and civilized Western citizenship.³ Thus, in this understanding of respectability, it is through labor and civic integration that migrant subjects are “constantly prov[ing] that they are capable of carrying the signs and capital of national belonging”⁴ that are required to be counted as respectable subjects of the nation.⁵ And within this ubiquitous and doubly layered apparatus of respectability, women refugees generate, resist and display female respectability via moral dispositions, bodily practices and markers that are deeply classed, gendered and raced.⁶ These different enactments of respectability constitute practices that escape the binaries of repression/liberation and hope/hopelessness.

Queer migration scholarship has generated a vast body of literature to help us understand the intersection of sexuality and migration.⁷ A central focus of this scholarship has been the study of LGBTI rights discourses, particularly around gender and sexuality, which are often foregrounded as necessary for governing and controlling refugees seeking entry into the Global North.⁸ This body of work has studied the representation of LGBTI asylum as a migration from “repression” in the Global South to “liberation” in the Global North, thereby casting the Global North as the bastion of human rights, freedom and

² Tithi Bhattacharya, *Social Reproduction Theory: Remapping Class, Recentering Oppression* (Pluto Press, 2017).

³ Sara R. Farris, *In the Name of Women's Rights: The Rise of Femonationalism* (Duke University Press, 2017); Jasbir Puar, *Terrorist Assemblages: Homonationalism in Queer Times* (Duke University Press, 2007).

⁴ Beverley Skeggs, *Class, Self, Culture* (Routledge, 2004), 19.

⁵ Gökben Demirbaş, *Gender, Class, and Respectability in Leisure: Understanding Women's 'Free Time Activities' in Modern Turkey* (Taylor & Francis, 2025), 9.

⁶ Skeggs, *Class, Self, Culture*.

⁷ Lionel Cantú, *The Sexuality of Migration: Border Crossings and Mexican Immigrant Men* (NYU Press, 2009); Monisha Das Gupta, *Unruly Immigrants: Rights, Activism, and Transnational South Asian Politics in the United States* (Duke University Press, 2006); Martin F. Manalansan, *Global Divas: Filipino Gay Men in the Diaspora* (Duke University Press, 2003); Eithne Luibhéid, “Queer/Migration: An Unruly Body of Scholarship”, *GLQ: A Journal of Lesbian and Gay Studies* 14, no. 2 (2008): 169–90; David Murray, *Real Queer?: Sexual Orientation and Gender Identity Refugees in the Canadian refugee apparatus* (Rowman and Littlefield, 2015).

⁸ Fadi Saleh and Tschalaer Mengia, “Introduction to special issue: queer liberalism and marginal mobilities”, *Ethnic and Racial Studies* 46, no. 9 (2023): 1769–90.

modernity.⁹ This is rendered in stark opposition to the Global South, especially the Muslim world, which is depicted as barbaric and queerphobic.¹⁰

Existing literature has primarily examined the reproduction of homonationalist discourses,¹¹ sexual nationalisms¹² (including a few studies in the Netherlands¹³) and the legal dimensions of the refugee determination process for LGBTI asylum seekers.¹⁴ However, these studies have often overemphasized

⁹ David Murray, “The Challenge of Home for Sexual Orientation and Gendered Identity Refugees in Toronto”, *Journal of Canadian Studies/Revue d’études canadiennes* 48, no.1 (2014): 134.

¹⁰ Sima Shakhari, “The queer time of death: temporality, geopolitics, and refugee rights”, *Sexualities* 17, no. 8 (2014): 998–1015, 10.1177/1363460714552261

¹¹ Puar, *Terrorist Assemblages*.

¹² See, e.g. Fatima El-Tayeb, *European Others: Queering Ethnicity in Postnational Europe* (Minneapolis: University of Minnesota Press, 2011); Suhraiya Jivraj and Anisa De Jong, “The Dutch homo-emancipation policy and its silencing effects on queer Muslims”, *Feminist Legal Studies* 19, no. 2 (2011): 143–58; Paul Mepschen, Jan Willem Duyvendak, and Evelien Tonkens, “Sexual politics, orientalism and multicultural citizenship in the Netherlands”, *Sociology* 44, no. 5 (2010): 962–79.

¹³ Edward J. Alessi, Sarilee Kahn, Brett Greenfield, Leah Woolner, and Dean Manning, “A Qualitative Exploration of the Integration Experiences of LGBTQ Refugees Who Fled from the Middle East, North Africa, and Central and South Asia to Austria and the Netherlands”, *Sexuality Research and Social Policy* 17 (2018): 13–26; C.L. Quinan, Dana Theewis, Cecilia Cienfuegos, Kevin Smets, Koen Leurs, Myria Georgiou, Saskia Witteborn, and Radhika Gajjala, “The Politics of Vulnerability and Protection: Analyzing the Case of LGBT Asylum Seekers in the Netherlands in Light of Securitization and Homonationalist Discourses”, in *The SAGE Handbook of Media and Migration*, ed. Kevin Smets, Koen Leurs, Myria Georgiou, Saskia Witteborn, and Radhika Gajjala (London: Sage Publications Ltd., 2019), 346–57; Yvon Van der Pijl, Brenda C. Oude Breuil, Lene Swetzer, Marilena Drymioti, and Marjolein Goderie, “‘We Do Not Matter’: Transgender Migrants/Refugees in the Dutch Asylum System”, *Violence and Gender* 5, no. 1 (2018): 1–11.

¹⁴ Calogero Giametta, *The Sexual Politics of Asylum: Sexual Orientation and Gender Identity in the UK Asylum System* (Abingdon: Routledge, 2017); Rachel Lewis, “‘Gay? Prove it’: The Politics of Queer Anti-Deportation Activism”, *Sexualities* 17, no. 8 (2014): 958–75; Fadi Saleh, “Queer/Humanitarian Visibility: War, Asylum, and the Emergence of the Figure of ‘the Suffering Syrian Gay Refugee’”, *Middle East Critique* 29, no. 1 (2020a): 47–67; Fadi Saleh, “Transgender as a Humanitarian Category: The Case of Syrian Queer and Gender-Variant Refugees in Turkey”, *TSQ: Transgender Studies Quarterly* 7, no. 1 (2020b): 37–55; Mert Koçak, “Who is ‘Queerer’ and Deserves Resettlement?: Queer Asylum Seekers and Their Deservingness of Refugee Status in Turkey”, *Middle East*

the legal aspects of the LGBTI refugee determination process and credibility assessments, as well as analyses of the “politician” dimension¹⁵ underpinning the invocation of LGBTI rights by the nation-state and its anti-Muslim policies. By doing so, they have overlooked the political-economic dimensions of queer migration—specifically how nationalist, anti-immigration and anti-Muslim discourses intersect with LGBTI rights discourse on both the political and economic levels on the one hand, and the material realities of LGBTI refugees in their day-to-day lives on the other.

By referring to political-economic lenses, I specifically mobilize social reproduction theory, which has been deployed to understand the reproduction of the capital system as a whole and the conditions necessary for the possibility to work.¹⁶ Feminist materialists have established connections between gender and social class,¹⁷ critiqued the divide between reproductive and productive labor¹⁸ and addressed the racialization of domestic work and feminized care work in the EU.¹⁹ This chapter thus fills this gap in the literature by examining the political-economic dimensions of how queer refugee women are constructed by Western European nations as reproductive, civilized and respectable subjects, through labor and civic integration.

One book that examines the political-economic components of mobilizing gender equality for anti-Muslim agendas in the Netherlands and Europe is *In the Name of Women's Rights: The Rise of Femonationalism* (2017) by

Critique 29, no. 1 (2020): 29–46; Murray, “The Challenge of Home for Sexual Orientation and Gendered Identity Refugees in Toronto”.

¹⁵ Farris, *In the Name of Women's Rights*, 5.

¹⁶ Bhattacharya, *Social Reproduction Theory*, 6. In this instance, and throughout the rest of this text, “social reproduction” connotes: “the activities and attitudes, behaviors and emotions, and responsibilities and relationships directly involved in maintaining life, on a daily basis and intergenerationally. It involves various kinds of socially necessary work—mental, physical, and emotional—aimed at providing the historically and socially, as well as biologically, defined means for maintaining and reproducing population. Among other things, social reproduction includes how food, clothing, and shelter are made available for immediate consumption, how the maintenance and socialization of children are accomplished, how care of the elderly and infirm is provided, and how sexuality is socially constructed” (Brenner and Laslett in Bhattacharya, *Social Reproduction Theory*, 6–7).

¹⁷ Beverley Skeggs, *Formations of Class and Gender: Becoming Respectable* (Thousand Oaks, CA: Sage, 1997).

¹⁸ Silvia Federici, *Caliban and the Witch: Women, the Body and Primitive Accumulation* (Autonomedia, 2004).

¹⁹ Encarnación Gutiérrez-Rodríguez, “The Precarity of Feminisation”, *International Journal of Politics, Culture, and Society* 27 (2014): 191–202, <https://doi.org/10.1007/s10767-013-9154-7>

Sara Farris. Farris's research on civic and economic integration policies in the Netherlands reveals that Muslim migrant women in these programs are systematically steered toward a limited range of jobs: cleaning, domestic labor, childcare, and caregiving for the elderly and disabled.²⁰ This, according to Farris, presents a contradiction, as femocrats²¹ advocate for the emancipation of Muslim women while simultaneously funneling them into the very precarious jobs that the (white) feminist movement has historically sought to liberate women from. These women are encouraged to be both emancipated, non-traditional women, as well as traditional women and good mothers fulfilling the roles prescribed by an unequal sexual division of labor.²² Farris's notion of femonationalism, however, does not fully address the experiences of queer refugees like Shathouma. It assumes that the migrant Muslim women who are in need of emancipation, rescue and civilization are (perceived as) heterosexual and traditional. I instead address the distinction between normative and non-normative sexualities and look at the role of the nation-state in enforcing a respectable and normative heterosexuality and dominant sexual norms²³ onto queer migrants. And I look at the ways queer Arab women are conceived as "already emancipated Muslim women" for holding markers of non-conformity to the stereotypical image of the Muslim woman—a simplistic binary which will be complicated throughout the analysis. Farris's notion of femonationalism also performs an exclusively state-focused structural approach that looks at the political-economic dimensions of Muslim women's integration policies within the neoliberal model of European citizenship, without considering the lived experience of navigating femonationalist state apparatuses. This chapter thus *queers* the notion of femonationalism by addressing how queer refugees experience on a day-to-day basis the operation of social reproduction, and by taking into consideration how heteronormativity constructs "the figure of the refugee—whether as a victim or as a threat—as presumptively heterosexual and as reproductive ... deserving or undeserving of moral concern".²⁴ This chapter asks how an amalgamation of femonationalist and homonationalist dis-

²⁰ Farris, *In the Name of Women's Rights*, 15.

²¹ Femocrats are (typically women) politicians and state bureaucrats who advocate feminist policies.

²² Farris, *In the Name of Women's Rights*, 149.

²³ Eithne Luibhéid, *Pregnant on Arrival: Making the Illegal Immigrant* (Minneapolis: University of Minnesota Press, 2013), 5.

²⁴ Myrto Tsilimpounidi and Anna Carastathis, "Facing Crisis: Queer Representations against the Backdrop of Athens", in *Queer and Trans Migrations: Dynamics of Illegalization, Detention, and Deportation*, ed. Eithne Luibhéid and Karma Chavez (R. Urbana, Chicago, and Springfield: University of Illinois Press, 2022), 140.

courses influence and impact queer migrant and refugee experience, as well as their relations to forms of work that demand specific performances of respectability. How might we better understand the workings of femonationalism and homonationalism in the Netherlands when adequately accounting for lesbian refugees—subjects who are framed as “already emancipated Muslim women” by the Dutch state? How does an ethnographic engagement with respectability—considering that this notion is embodied, lived and negotiated alongside its nationalist and political-economic registers—deepen our understanding of how gender, sexuality and citizenship/race are classed by design?

To delve into these questions, I selected a case study on lesbian refugees from Arab-majority countries in the Netherlands, an ideal site for investigating the relationships between LGBTI asylum processes, integration politics and the notion of respectability. The Netherlands is well known for its homonationalism, where the inclusion of some gays within the Dutch nation project and selective reconfiguration of respectable citizenship happened simultaneously with the vilification and exclusion of the racial Muslim *Other* from the national imaginary.²⁵ Attending ethnographically to the notion of respectability, this chapter examines the role of Dutch homonationalist and femonationalist policies²⁶ in regulating the lives of lesbian refugee subjects. I look specifically to how respectability is deployed by and against lesbian refugees in their crisscrossing of the ideals of respectable womanhood, the necessity of performing disrespectful and traditional feminized labor, and the paradoxical expectations of a so-called integrated and respectable queer refugee in Europe.

Methodologically, the analytical insights presented herein stem from ethnographic research conducted between 2019–2024 in the Netherlands. This research encompassed in-depth interviews conducted in spoken Arabic and employed participant-observation,²⁷ involving 20 LGBTI refugees from the Arab-majority world in the Netherlands, including 12 lesbians, and numerous informal discussions with others. I interviewed lesbians who sought asylum with their families/partners (from unsafe countries like Syria) as well as lesbians who traveled alone to the Netherlands (from safe countries) and sought asylum based on persecution of their sexual identity. While their experiences vary in regard to nationality, class background and relationship to family, they point to similar experiences with Dutch integration. I analyzed the interview transcripts and my field notes employing an open-coding method

²⁵ Puar, *Terrorist Assemblages*, 2.

²⁶ Although the AZC and the family is an important site where respectability formations are enacted, in this chapter I exclusively focus on the relationship with the state.

²⁷ In private and public spaces.

following “grounded theory”.²⁸ Among the codes that were generated were respectability, emancipation, integration, labor, civility, womanhood, femonationalism and homonationalism. Interview questions focused on experiences in the Netherlands. I conducted this research not solely in the capacity of a researcher-observer, but also as a trans migrant from Lebanon who has been involved in queer refugee organizing since 2017, the year I co-founded *Sehaq Queer Refugees Group*.²⁹ Many interviewees were individuals I met either within *Sehaq* (-adjacent) circles, with whom I have friendships and co-create knowledge. I employ methodologies of feminist participatory action research, which are dedicated to liberationist movements, center the lived experience of research participants, and bolster genuine collaboration in the research process.³⁰ Over the course of my research I also engaged in conversations with NGO staff and organizers, as well as asylum lawyers.

In the first section, I expound on the specific contexts in the Netherlands, where the civic and economic integration policies which focus on Muslim migrant women entering a social reproductive workforce impact both queer and non-queer women alike. I argue that respectability manifests in relation to queer womanhood, labor policies and civilizational discourses in specific ways, most notably in the institutional influence and guidance that pushes them into dirty feminized and unpaid labor, and further remarkable in a context where femonationalist formations give queer women refugees their status as both “already emancipated” and respectable in the eyes of the Dutch state.

In the second section, I further define the contours of respectability by delving into an analysis of civility and traditional womanhood within the LGBTI asylum system and civic integration policies that shape the lives of queer migrants. The nuances themselves contribute to my thinking with/through femonationalism as they crystalize how queer women refugees are being interpellated as wives, mothers and traditional women, and simultaneously being framed as more civilized/emancipated.

²⁸ Barney Glaser and Anselm Strauss, *The Discovery of Grounded Theory: Strategies for Qualitative Research* (Oxfordshire, UK: Routledge, 2017).

²⁹ *Sehaq Queer Refugees Group* is a group in Amsterdam that organizes community-building events such as parties, dinners, workshops and film screenings, as well as political demonstrations and protests.

³⁰ See Bev Gatenby and Maria Humphries, “Feminist Participatory Action Research: Methodological and Ethical Issues”, *Women’s Studies International Forum* 23, no. 1 (2000): 89–105.

FEMONATIONALISM, INTEGRATION AND 'RESPECTABLE' LABOR

Asylum seekers are scattered across the numerous AZCs in the Netherlands; securitized facilities that are almost always located in remote and isolated areas that are often difficult and costly to access by public transport.³¹ Once asylum seekers are granted a residence permit, they are matched to a municipality based on several criteria, including their work prospects.³² After receiving their first residence permit, refugees are then obliged to take civic integration courses (and to successfully complete a number of exams within three years), a process designed to help in their integration and their entry into the labor market. Recent data from the Netherlands has shown that refugees are mostly employed in the cleaning, hospitality and catering sectors, and the vast majority have temporary or precarious contracts.³³

Migration scholars have demonstrated that civic integration policies in the Netherlands focus on migrant women entering the workforce.³⁴ The Dutch Council for Work and Income precisely mentioned the important role of migrant women in compensating for the labor shortages in the care sector.³⁵ The need to attend to these labor shortages appeared in two EU documents from 2011 about the integration of migrants, which placed attention on the economic problems arising specifically from the aging European population. They recommended a policy of stricter border control where the entrance of migrants should be limited only to workers who are able to cover labor shortages in the EU.³⁶ These policy documents specifically signposted migrant women's lower employment rates and attributed them to their "backward" cultural backgrounds, which allegedly subjugate Muslim women and do not

³¹ Kara E. Dempsey, "Migrant agency and counter-hegemonic efforts among asylum seekers in the Netherlands in response to geopolitical control and exclusion", *Geopolitics* 27, no. 2 (2022): 402–423.

³² "Housing of status holders", COA (Centraal Orgaan opvang asielzoekers), accessed September 16, 2024, <https://www.coa.nl/en/housing-status-holders>

³³ "Work and education", SER, May 2024, accessed September 16, 2024, <https://www.ser.nl/nl/thema/werkwijzer-vluchtelingen/feiten-en-cijfers/arbeidsmarkt>

³⁴ Katherine Margaret Kirk and Semin Suvarierol, "Emancipating Migrant Women? Gendered Civic Integration in the Netherlands", *Social Politics: International Studies in Gender, State & Society* 21, no. 2, Summer (2014): 241–60, 242 <https://doi.org/10.1093/sp/jxu005>.

³⁵ Kirk and Suvarierol, "Emancipating Migrant Women?", 254.

³⁶ Farris, *In the Name of Women's Rights*, 119–120.

encourage them to seek paid labor.³⁷ Migration was and is framed as a way to improve the productivity of the EU economy.

Based on my own findings as well as the results of several studies, despite the encouragement of women's organizations and female politicians in the Netherlands on the necessity of integrating these women economically by seeking employment outside the private sphere, Muslim migrant women have been confined to care and domestic work in the household—precisely the work from which Western European feminists wish to liberate themselves.³⁸ Caregiving and domestic work are considered dirty, disreputable and low-status jobs, characterized by low pay, poor working conditions, very long hours, isolation and employer–employee relations founded on paternalism and lack of respect—jobs that are unwanted by most European women.³⁹ The scarcity of labor supply of Western European women has made the reproductive labor sector in the Netherlands the most common economic niche for migrant women.⁴⁰

State agencies and organizations in the Netherlands have not only pushed migrant women towards the social reproductive sector, but have also encouraged them to do free labor. Manal, who is a Syrian lesbian working at an NGO that supports refugees in the Netherlands, testified to this fact. She told me that there are only three types of jobs for Syrian women: “*Zorg* (caregiving and nursing), cleaning and *horeca* (restaurants); sometimes it's even unpaid volunteer work.”

One of the offshoot projects emerging from the PaVEM commission (*Participatie van Vrouwen uit Etnische Minderheidsgroepen*, Commission for the Participation of Ethnic Minority Women) in 2007, which focused on civic integration and was spearheaded by the Dutch Ministry of Education, Culture and Science, was “The Force of a Thousand and One” (*Duizend en Een Kracht*), which specifically tried to motivate and mobilize 50,000 migrant women to participate in Dutch society through unpaid volunteer work.⁴¹ Since 2007, many similar projects have emerged based on a similar bizarre logic that presents unpaid volunteer work as the way towards reaching the goal of economic independence.⁴² In these projects, migrant women were assigned unpaid volunteer jobs in care and domestic work in hospitals, elderly homes, schools and childcare facilities.⁴³

³⁷ Farris, *In the Name of Women's Rights*, 119–120.

³⁸ Farris, *In the Name of Women's Rights*, 15.

³⁹ Bridget Anderson, *Doing the Dirty Work?: The Global Politics of Domestic Labour* (Zed Books, 2000).

⁴⁰ Farris, *In the Name of Women's Rights*, 161.

⁴¹ Kirk and Suvarierol, “Emancipating Migrant Women?”, 254.

⁴² Farris, *In the Name of Women's Rights*, 125.

⁴³ Kirk and Suvarierol, “Emancipating Migrant Women?”, 254.

Given this context in the Netherlands, where civic and economic integration policies focus on Muslim migrant women entering the social reproductive workforce, how do queer women specifically experience these policies?

Your Place is Already Defined ... Europeans Accept Me More Because I Drink Alcohol

I wanted to apply for the Baccalaureate, but the school⁴⁴ didn't allow me. Instead, they made me enroll in a training called Schoonmaak en Facilitaire (Cleaning and Facility Vocational Training) in Dordrecht, which was meant to prepare me to become a cleaning lady ... The Dutch school principal said to me 'In the Netherlands, we need laboring hands.' I was 17 or 18 at the time ... I attended the program for a month ... I had to move to another city⁴⁵ to study

They don't want you to study ... your place is already defined. I saw this firsthand because I didn't live in Amsterdam, where Arab intellectuals and artists are. I lived among Arab families where the girls went into *zorg*,⁴⁶ and the boys went into *mechanisch* (jobs as mechanics) ... or PostNL (mail carrier), much like where I live right now. ... a social housing project in the outskirts of Amsterdam ... All the refugee men here work for PostNL ... They don't have the proper image needed to interact with Europeans ... My experience is different. [Europeans] accept me more because ... I drink alcohol.

Sankouha invokes different modalities of respectability through a sequence of multilayered arguments. Sankouha is a working-class Palestinian refugee from Yarmouk, Syria. Like many, Sankouha fled the war in 2015 with her mother and sister, arriving in the Netherlands via the Libya corridor, considered to be the most dangerous route to reach Europe, whereupon they applied for asylum. I met Sankouha through Arab circles in Amsterdam in 2023, and we became friends afterwards. Although Sankouha identifies as a bisexual woman, she is uncomfortable using terms that refer to her sexual identity because she associates such language with European society and values, which she describes as "bourgeois". Similarly to Shathouma, Sankouha expresses a stronger alignment with Palestinian liberation than with LGBTI rights. And despite disidentifying from the Euro-Western LGBTI system of identity and labels, she acknowledges and embraces her identity as a "disreputable" woman. From a young age in Yarmouk camp and more recently at the AZC, she was often labeled as the "*sharmouta*", or "*felteneh* girl" (the slut; sexually unrestrained). She explains that she is not the girl her family wants: the respectable, marriageable woman.

44 In Dordrecht.

45 Eindhoven.

46 Jobs in caregiving and nursing.

Sankouha's provocative humor and her obvious disillusionment with the Dutch system, the LGBTI scene in the Netherlands, and her family make clear how respectability is decidedly a classed, raced, gendered and sexualized concept with contours that rely on the bounds of civilizational and citizenship formations. A large body of work has looked at respectability and its relationship to citizenship and civilizational discourses. The term "politics of respectability" was introduced by Evelyn Brooks Higginbotham in her study of the women's movement in black Baptist churches in the United States.⁴⁷ Higginbotham uses this term to refer to black women's deployment of narratives of respectability and retainment of middle-class ideals as a way of countering images of black people being immoral and as a way of resisting daily racism and dehumanization. Likewise, Beverly Skeggs has looked at how working-class women in the US perform respectability and disidentify from disrespectable working-class positioning,⁴⁸ coming to associate the latter with pathology and dirtiness. Within Middle East studies, the concept of respectability has received considerable attention, especially in relation to women's sexual and moral reputation. The term *satr*⁴⁹ (feminine adjective *mastura*) or *ihitiramiya*⁵⁰ encapsulates the gendered aspects of respectability, which can be preserved by accomplishing economic security, retaining sexual honor, sheltering femininity, upholding the "ideal of female seclusion", and conforming to normative attires and behaviors.⁵¹

After examining how respectability manifests in relation to womanhood, labor policies and civilizational discourses, several insights surface. Sankouha adamantly refuses the Dutch system's attempt to domesticate her and to force her into knowing "her place" by becoming a servile cleaning lady in exchange for inclusion in the Dutch national project. Another essential element here is Sankouha's reluctance to subscribe to the "bourgeois" and civilized LGBTI scene and rights regime of the Netherlands. Instead, she is rooted in and moved by her experience as a Palestinian refugee woman primarily concerned with class and labor struggles in the Netherlands and with the liberation of Palestine. At the same time, she maintains and takes pride in her

⁴⁷ Evelyn B. Higginbotham, *Righteous Discontent: The Women's Movement in the Black Baptist Church, 1880–1920* (Cambridge, UK: Harvard University Press, 1993).

⁴⁸ Skeggs, *Formations of Class and Gender*, 74.

⁴⁹ Hanan Hammad, "Disreputable by definition: respectability and theft by poor women in urban interwar Egypt", *Journal of Middle East Women's Studies* 13, no. 3 (2017): 376–94, <https://doi.org/10.1215/15525864-4179012>.

⁵⁰ Leila Zaki Chakravarti, *Made in Egypt: Gendered Identity and Aspiration on the Globalized Shop Floor* (New York, NY: Berghahn, 2016).

⁵¹ Hammad, "Disreputable by definition", 378.

anti-respectable, non-honorable and sexually unrestrained position and self-identification. She is loudly defiant of the responsible and internalized female obedience and propriety expected by both her school principal, the Dutch system and her family.

Contrary to the common narratives often portrayed in European media, which depict LGBTI refugees from Arab-majority countries as being (finally) emancipated and free to express their identities in Europe after fleeing their oppressive Arab cultures, Sankouha offers a contrasting perspective. Sankouha is highly skeptical of what many queer studies scholars refer to as “respectability politics”—a discourse that incorporates LGBTI refugees into the realm of nationhood and citizenship,⁵² portraying Western nations as bastions of LGBTI rights and freedoms,⁵³ while framing LGBTI refugees as victims of their allegedly backward and homophobic Arab/Muslim cultures, as argued by Sarah Bracke.⁵⁴ Instead, Sankouha’s main grievances center on the labor system in the Netherlands that creates the “respectable” citizen and which exploits both LGBTI and non-LGBTI refugees who, in her words, already have a “defined place” in the labor market.

Sankouha is also critical of Dutch societal attitudes towards Arabs who are not perceived as sufficiently “emancipated” or respectable and who accept her because she drinks alcohol. Despite being perceived as “already emancipated Muslim women” contra non-liberated Arab peers, queer refugee women like Sankouha don’t seek to access citizenship by deploying respectability norms that have to do with assimilation into Dutch national culture. They reject the tactic of conforming to what is considered the worthy migrant. They also enact a cynicism, hopelessness and disillusionment with Dutch gay politics that can challenge dominant and alienating social models including “gay respectability politics and the sentimentality of the citizen.”⁵⁵

Work in the care sector that is unpaid or carried out in poor conditions is expected of both queer and non-queer refugee women alike. Reported in several studies,⁵⁶ many gay male and trans women refugees participate in some form of sex work. During the protracted waiting time for a decision on their

⁵² Jin Haritaworn, “Queer injuries: the racial politics of ‘homophobic hate crime’ in Germany”, *Social Justice* 37, no. 1 (2010): 75.

⁵³ Murray, “The Challenge of Home,” 134.

⁵⁴ Sarah Bracke, “From ‘saving women’ to ‘saving gays’: Rescue narratives and their dis/continuities”, *European Journal of Women’s Studies* 19, no. 2 (2012): 237–52.

⁵⁵ Lisa Duggan and José Esteban Muñoz, “Hope and hopelessness: A dialogue”, *Women & Performance: A Journal of Feminist Theory* 19, no. 2 (2009): 279.

⁵⁶ e.g. Van der Pijl et al., “We do not matter”.

application, which can last for years, while they continue to be housed in an AZC, asylum seekers are not allowed to work, thus excluding them from the formal labor market and pushing them into exploitative labor conditions in the black and gray markets, including sex work, as some of my interlocutors confirmed. This is the type of reproductive labor that Europe doesn't want to do and thus deploys queer refugees and migrant women specifically to fill these labor shortages.

In the coming section, we will explore further the context of economic and civic integration which invites these jobs that have little status and are considered disreputable in Dutch society—a society itself built on the ideals of the nuclear family and traditional motherhood.⁵⁷ This step is needed for us to further define the contours of respectability. I will focus on how queer refugee women navigate the LGBTI asylum system and Dutch homonationalism while being interpellated as mothers and traditional women, and while simultaneously being framed as more emancipated than their non-working peers—a paradox that lies at the heart of how respectability operates.

CIVILITY, WOMANHOOD AND UBIQUITOUS RESPECTABILITY

Proper Womanhood

Respectability is a signifier of citizen-making, whereby citizenship is “a mechanism by which dominant class divided oppositional class forces by ‘individualizing’ them ... the respectable section of the working-class who, in return for political rights and social benefits, are expected to labor for the improvement of the race, the economy and extension of empire”.⁵⁸ This moral and class-informed division between the deserving and undeserving migrant encapsulates the mechanisms of citizenship and belonging to the national project.

Civic integration policies in the Netherlands focus not only on migrant women as wage workers, but also on their roles as child bearers, mothers and educators of second-generation citizens.⁵⁹ In 2003, the Dutch cabinet created PaVEM to improve migrant women's access to employment and promote their integration. Its guiding philosophy was, “If you educate a mother, you educate

⁵⁷ Rineke Van Daalen, “Paid Mothering in the Public Domain: Dutch Dinner Ladies and their Difficulties”, *Journal of Social History* 40, no. 3 (2007): 620–21, 10.1353/jsh.2007.0076

⁵⁸ Beverley Skeggs, *Class, Self, Culture*, 30–40, quoted in Gökben Demirbaş, *Gender, Class, and Respectability in Leisure: Understanding Women's 'Free Time Activities' in Modern Turkey* (Taylor & Francis, 2025).

⁵⁹ Kirk and Suvarierol, “Emancipating Migrant Women?”, 242.

a family,” thus demonstrating how the commission aimed to reduce women to their role as mothers.⁶⁰ That is because Muslim migrant women not only serve as exceptionally useful and productive reproductive workers who reproduce the material conditions of social reproduction, but they are also “reproductive bodies”.⁶¹

In Dutch political discussions over the course of the 2000s, the underachievement of migrant children at school was linked to the perceived lack of societal integration of their mothers, who were portrayed as uneducated women from Morocco or Turkey; migration was thus also framed as the importation of “bad” non-integrated mothers.⁶² The new policy on the integration of migrant women aimed to position them as key figures in the process of integration of the second generation, mainly by focusing on teaching them how to become properly “Dutchified” mothers.⁶³ While gender equality is highlighted in civic integration infrastructure as a core achievement of Dutch society—contrasting it with non-Western societies, where gender equality is often presumed to be lacking—Muslim women often receive mixed messages, being encouraged to be both independent, nontraditional subjects and at the same time devoted mothers, following a more traditional idea of womanhood.⁶⁴

Lesbian Nafaqa (Alimony), Civilized Refugees

Laith is a transmasculine refugee from Morocco (he identified as a lesbian when he first arrived in the Netherlands). Similar to the testimonies of Shathouma, Sankouha and Manal, Laith was also persuaded to pursue precarious work and encouraged to be obedient to Dutch integration norms. He recounts that municipality staff have told him, “You have to accept any type of job we give you.” Surprisingly, he was also asked to contact his ex-husband in Morocco and to ask for *Nafaqa* (alimony) from him, which could substitute for Laith’s *uitkering* payment, therefore reducing costs for the municipality.

In contrast to other interlocutors mentioned in this article, Laith sought asylum based on persecution of sexual identity, and like many lesbians from Arab-majority regions, he used to be married in Morocco. As Laith notes, the contact person at the municipality knew that Laith was a lesbian, as this

⁶⁰ Kirk and Suvarierol, “Emancipating Migrant Women?”, 245.

⁶¹ Farris, *In the Name of Women’s Rights*, 180–81.

⁶² Saskia Bonjour and Betty de Hart, “A proper wife, a proper marriage. Constructions of ‘us’ and ‘them’ in Dutch family migration policy”, *European Journal of Women’s Studies* 20, no. 4 (2013): 10, <https://doi.org/10.1177/1350506812456459>

⁶³ Farris, *In the Name of Women’s Rights*, 94.

⁶⁴ Farris, *In the Name of Women’s Rights*, 96.

was documented within his integration file, yet he still faced the same type of treatment that a straight Muslim woman would face. Laith thinks that lesbian refugees are treated in the same way as straight refugee women by the Dutch integration and reception process, with the only difference being the refugee determination process. This is something that Manal had asserted when she stated to me, “*buitenlanders* (migrants), whether lesbians or not, are treated all the same, Dutch people are racist to them, they pressure them to take the jobs that they do not want for themselves.”

Laith explains that the refugee determination process was very difficult. He speaks about the series of required interviews, recollecting,

They make you feel naked, it’s humiliating ... They asked me questions my own friends don’t know these intimate information ... They focus on what a lesbian should look like and ... ‘in your culture’ type of questions. They also repeated the questions frequently, as a way to set you a trap.

He claimed that LGBTI asylum seekers have an advantage over their straight counterparts because it is a more expedited process—despite its difficulty—but the condition is that:

[Y]ou need to have proof and speak the language of Dutch freedom and their Western sexuality, otherwise rejection ... it’s very different if you don’t come from NGO world.

Reflecting on his time in the AZC, he explains that:

The enemy is COA, the system, not each other! [The IND and COA] make you believe that you are better than [straight refugees], that you are more civilized and of a higher rank ... they inflate the ego. They say that if you are harassed as queer, you can use the Pink Police, but you are not protected! It’s an illusion. If I would go back to the camp, I would change things ... I would fight the system and talk to these people.

In Laith’s account, respectability shifts and transforms depending on the context. First, migration researchers have documented how stricter immigration and civic integration policies in the Netherlands and France have increased migrant women’s dependency on their male spouse.⁶⁵ For instance, many migrant women risk losing their legal residency if their relationship ends or they are dependent on their partner for making payments and fines related to

⁶⁵ Miriam Ticktin, “Sexual violence as the language of border control: Where French feminist and anti-immigrant rhetoric meet”, *Signs: Journal of Women in Culture and Society* 33, no. 4 (2008): 875; Kirk and Suvarierol, “Emancipating Migrant Women?”, 250.

their civic integration process.⁶⁶ Although Laith's case was not specifically about reliance on his male spouse, he was nevertheless asked to reach out to his ex-husband for financial retribution, even as a lesbian refugee recognized as such by the immigration and asylum system.

Second, Laith brings forth the intersection between LGBTI politics, civility and Dutch nationalism. Laith explains that these credibility assessment interviews are laden with the idea that a respectable and civilized Dutch citizenship is synonymous with the embracing of sexual freedoms. Indeed, as many scholars have pointed out, the Netherlands is a paradigmatic case of homonationalism, celebrated as the pioneering nation to first legalize civil unions for gays and lesbians in 2001, and likewise renowned for Amsterdam being a global capital for gay consumerism.⁶⁷ The Dutch national identity has fashioned itself through its self-image as a nation that celebrates and embraces its LGBTI populations, including LGBTI asylum seekers, and has used this brand to contrast itself against allegedly homophobic, backward and uncivilized Muslims.⁶⁸ Recent debates dating from the so-called "refugee crisis" of 2015 over the alleged homophobia among Muslim migrants have sparked moral panic in the Netherlands.⁶⁹ The Netherlands is also known for its far-right nationalist and anti-Muslim politicians such as Pim Fortuyn, a gay politician who popularized anti-Muslim rhetoric in the early 2000s,⁷⁰ and his successor, Geert Wilders, who founded his own political party in 2006 and eventually adopted certain aspects of femonationalist/homonationalist ideologies.

Third, Laith emphasizes the difficulties of the interviews conducted as part of the refugee determination process. This part of the process has been widely studied—LGBTI asylum seekers are expected to share private details about their intimate lives in order to prove both their sexual/gender identities as LGBTI individuals and their well-founded fear of persecution.⁷¹ Laith points out that the supposed privilege, civility and protection that lesbian refugees get

⁶⁶ Ticktin, "Sexual violence as the language of border control", 875; Kirk and Suvarierol, "Emancipating Migrant Women?", 250.

⁶⁷ Keith McNeal and Sarah Brennan, "Between homonationalism and Islamophobia: comparing queer Caribbean and Muslim asylum seeking in/to the Netherlands", in *Queer Migration and Asylum in Europe*, ed. Richard Mole (UCL Press, 2021), 303.

⁶⁸ Murat Aydemir, "'Let's Get Some Family Chosen': Refugees, Homonationalism, and Queer Family Rhetoric", in *The Routledge Handbook of Queer Rhetoric*, ed. Jacqueline Rhodes and Jonathan Alexander (Routledge, 2022), 167–73; Bracke, "From 'saving women' to 'saving gays'".

⁶⁹ McNeal and Brennan, "Between homonationalism and Islamophobia", 295.

⁷⁰ Puar, *Terrorist Assemblages*, 20.

⁷¹ Murray, "The Challenge of Home".

over straight refugees in the Netherlands is actually an illusion. Laith explains that this distinction (between queer and non-queer refugees) does not transmit into material differences and, in effect, creates antagonisms and divides refugees from one another instead of allowing them to unify against their shared enemy: the migration system that oppresses them equally. We can see in Laith's responses that LGBTI refugees use the politics of respectability and civility, which is awarded to them through a new form of neoliberal citizenship usually reserved for race- and class-privileged LGBTI people.⁷² This politics of civility is also encapsulated within the LGBTI communities themselves, as he asserts that not all LGBTI refugees will successfully pass the credibility assessment; rather, those who have previously held powerful roles and elite positions in NGOs in their country of origin will be much more likely to pass this assessment procedure, thereby signposting clear class differences among LGBTI refugees themselves. Laith is not only committed to refusing simplistic binaries of repressed/liberated, civilized/uncivilized and straight/queer, but also manifesting sentiments of hope and hopelessness towards LGBTI politics which seem to exist in a dialectical rather than oppositional relation.⁷³

My findings on the intersection of civility, queer migration and respectability partly align with Farris's notion of femonationalism, but also diverge from it. Laith's experience with municipal workers inquiring into the feasibility of receiving a *Nafaqa* payment lays bare the power of the nationalist and colonialist ideologies rooted in civic integration policies; this suggests a kind of congealing of the category of the oppressed Muslim woman divorcee being offered protection by the Dutch nation with the roles and expectations of the heterosexual woman migrant, whose function is transmitting dominant cultural norms to their offspring. This not only encapsulates the deceptive framing of Europe as the exclusive site for liberating Muslim women and queers, but also demonstrates that lesbian refugees present a glitch in the logics that underpin Dutch integration policies. Unlike Farris's ultimate argument, lesbian refugees are not necessarily "reproductive bodies"; nor are they mothers or wives in the traditional sense. They are thus interpellated through discourses and public policy in Western Europe which often reinscribe traditional models of femininity and motherhood within the family by centering the heterosexual nuclear family.⁷⁴ Here, the interplay between respectability discourses and Dutch institutions is starkly clear in relation to sexual politics, as the logics that were ostensibly intended to emancipate were actually appropriated by the state

⁷² Sarah Lamble, "Queer investments in punitiveness: sexual citizenship, social movements and the expanding carceral state", in *Queer necropolitics*, ed. Jin Haritaworn, Adi Kuntsman, and Silvia Posocco (Oxford: Routledge, 2014), 151.

⁷³ Duggan and Muñoz, "Hope and hopelessness", 280.

⁷⁴ Gutiérrez Rodríguez, "The Precarity of Feminisation".

and subsequently deployed in the service of policies that embolden the very same exploitative labor and integration apparatuses that these queer women must attack and overcome to get free.

CONCLUSION

In this chapter, I have shown that queer refugee-ness allows us to more adequately make sense of the apparatus of femonationalism beyond the framework of heterosexual migrant womanhood. By delving into the day-to-day basis of the operation of social reproduction among Europe's dirty low-status workers, this analysis pushes us towards the realization that respectability is mediated by class, race, gender and sexuality, sustained and propagated by the state and its policies. I have outlined several cases to unpack the intersection of civic integration, lesbian refugee-ness and respectability. Respectability manifests within Dutch integration policies which drive lesbian refugees into dirty, feminized and unpaid labor in a context where femonationalist formations give lesbian refugees their status as both "already emancipated" and respectable in the eyes of the Dutch state. Respectability is further located in the interplay between civility and traditional womanhood within the LGBTI asylum system and civic integration policies that shape the lives of lesbian refugees. Lesbian refugees are being interpellated as wives, mothers and traditional women, and simultaneously being framed as more civilized/emancipated. Amid their destabilization of the binaries of hope/hopelessness in the practices of respectability, lesbian refugees refuse, with a clear hopelessness, the model of the "already emancipated Muslim woman".

Full membership in society as a democratic citizen under state-managed capitalism includes dignity, respectability, rights, material comfort and moral prestige—all of which are understood to require a stable heteronormative family life.⁷⁵ This chapter, despite aiming to *queer* the notion of femonationalism, is an attempt to think about how all refugees are regulated by the moral order distinguishing between deserving and undeserving refugees, as well as how liberation is not based on refugees' identities but rather their relationships to the means of production.

⁷⁵ Nancy Fraser, "Contradictions of capital and care", *New Left Review* 100, July/August (2016), <https://newleftreview.org/issues/ii100/articles/nancy-fraser-contradictions-of-capital-and-care>

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