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Irregular migration is skilled migration: reimagining skill in EU's migration policies

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Irregular migration, the movement of people outside legal regulations, is largely viewed either as a security threat or a moral, humanitarian impetus to help the vulnerable. The lack of data on irregular migration obscures the contribution of migrants without legal residence in the farms and factories of Europe. It also makes invisible their skill levels and labour market potential. A growing body of literature that centres coloniality and racism in contemporary migration policies informs our study on how the category of skill is instrumentalised as an othering tool. Through the lived experiences of 34 non-European migrants who arrived in Belgium through irregular routes, we examine skilled migration and irregular migration as modalities of inclusion and exclusion. What we find is a high degree of heterogeneity of skills among irregular migrants in terms of education levels and aspirations. Skills are dynamic and responsive to migration trajectories as individuals acquire a whole gamut of proficiencies while on the move. At the same time, individuals face a high degree of deskilling when forced into legal limbo, especially those living in camps without pathways to legalisation. Experiences also highlight how the construct of illegality and irregularity leaves migrants vulnerable to labour market exploitation and negative social discourses. The core of our contribution lies in challenging the assumptions of rigid migration categories and their role in reproducing global inequalities and racial hierarchies.

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Introduction

Irregular migration – the “movement of persons that takes place outside the laws, regulations, or international agreements governing the entry into or exit from the State of origin, transit or destination”¹ – is a growing concern in migration policies across Europe (Fox-Ruhs and Ruhs, 2022; de Haas et al., 2019). There is a persistent “threat-victim binary” (Polychroniou, 2021: 254) in any discussion on irregular migration, which masks the role that irregular migrants² play in various economic sectors across Europe (Ruhs, 2013). This scheme leaves no room for the skills and aspirations of irregular migrants, who are assumed to have little to offer host countries.

The discourse on irregular migration is fuelled by the lack of data on key indicators regarding incoming migrants (Bircan et al. 2020; Ahmad-Yar & Bircan 2021). As per 2019 PEW estimates (based on data from 2014–2015), there are approximately 2.9 and 3.8 million irregular migrants in all EEA Member states plus Switzerland (Fox-Ruhs and Ruhs, 2022). Most are from non-European countries, particularly the Middle East and Africa. Little else is known about age, gender, level of education, trajectories to Europe, or even sector of work before and after migration (Kofman, 2019; Purkayastha & Bircan, 2023). This gap allows embedded racial and ethnic biases in migration policies and political rhetoric to proliferate and be treated as common-sense.

It is estimated that most irregular migrants work in some capacity in Europe to support themselves (Fox-Ruhs and Ruhs, 2022) and often in precarious forms of irregular work (Triandafyllidou and Bartolini, 2020). Studies and news reports, particularly during the COVID-19 pandemic, revealed that irregular migrants comprise a significant share of EU workers in sectors such as meatpacking industries, agriculture, construction, domestic work (Spencer & Triandafyllidou, 2020) and platform jobs such as delivery. Because they lack permits and papers, these workers are precariously employed, underpaid, often physically and mentally abused and living in camps under threat of deportation. Much-needed interventions ensuring certain rights and several protections for irregular migrants in EU labour markets have now been proposed (Fox-Ruhs and Ruhs, 2022).

However, international policies, such as the Global Pact for Migration and the EU’s new Asylum and Migration Pact, continue to reflect on irregular migration within a framework of undesirability. The growing securitisation and border-anxieties of the European Union, particularly with regard to its Mediterranean borders, keeps the focus on concerns around legality, economic burdens, morality and integration (Moffette and Vadasaria, 2016). If not undesirability, vulnerability becomes a lens of representation as most irregular migrants are fleeing immediate war and persecution or the severe economic consequences of past conflicts³. Highlighting conditions of vulnerability, closely intertwined with racial and ethnic biases (Crawley and Skleparis, 2018), often leaves little room to acknowledge or accommodate the capacities and capabilities of irregular newcomers.

To better illustrate this, consider the discourse around the recent arrival of refugees from Ukraine in 2022. The media, politicians and policy organisations were quick to establish a binary between European refugees and irregular migrants from other countries deploying racism, xenophobia, and orientalist tropes (Diallo, 2022). An OECD report from July 2022 stated:

“Ukrainian refugees do not fit the *typical portrait of refugees*: some of their characteristics are likely to improve their integration prospects, while others may, on the contrary, hinder them. First, as noted, a relatively high share of Ukrainian refugees have a tertiary level of education. In itself, even though *these highly educated*

refugees may not be able to find jobs corresponding to their qualifications, this should improve their employment prospects. They should also be *better equipped* to learn the language of their host country than *low-educated or illiterate refugees* [emphasis added]” (OECD, 2022: 5).

Official EU communications at the time also stressed how Ukrainian refugees had more labour market potential⁴ and skills, and potential benefit to the host society became the site of differentiation and deservingness. This us-and-them paradigm feeds into an already-prevalent tendency to associate refugees from the “Global South”⁵ (Mignolo, 2011) with poverty, conflict, disorder and threat as opposed to the white expat who is assumed to add value to host societies (Olier Jauregui and Spadavecchia (2022)).

This assumption of merit and worthiness is not a benign process, but overlaps with protections granted. In March 2022, the European Union asked its member states to invoke the Temporary Protection Directive (2001/55/EC), which would grant Ukrainian refugees immediate residence, health benefits and access to the EU labour market. By November 2022, 4,699,333 people from Ukraine had already registered for temporary protection in the EU (UNHCR, 2022). In contrast, as per Eurostat data, only 38.58% of total asylum applications (202,035/524,325) in 2021 (largely migrants from the Middle East, Asia and Latin America) received a positive decision. These included people on different acceptance statuses such as the Geneva convention status, humanitarian status and subsidiary protection status.

This paper does not question the EU’s response to refugees from Ukraine. Read De Coninck (2022) for a nuanced analysis of the myriad factors that made Ukrainians seem “more deserving of aid” (ibid). Instead, we examine why and how irregular, emergency migration from one part of the world is systemically framed in conjunction with skill and value, while others are framed as opportunists, low-skilled and people of less value (Crawley and Skleparis, 2018). To do so, we bring into our analytical framework studies on skilled migration, post-colonial and decolonial migration studies and international asylum law. An interdisciplinary conceptual framework allows us to flesh out the connection between the historical construction of migration policies as racialised borders and the role that the notion of skill plays in this process today.

Drawing on reflections from in-depth semi-structured interviews with 34 irregular migrants who arrived in Belgium between 2005–2015, we see how skills shape migration trajectories – when acquired, when stifled and even when incessantly devalued. First, we examine the heterogeneity among irregular migrants in terms of qualifications and work experience and how they are received once in Europe. Unpacking the dynamism of skill, we see how it ebbs and flows throughout migration journeys. Finally, we examine how irregularity as a legal construct creates systemic barriers for migrants, limiting them to extremely precarious positions in the labour market and in society. The core of our contribution lies in challenging the assumptions of rigid migration categories and examining how they reproduce inequalities.

Illegality as a legal category

This section is the first of a two-step attempt to contextualise irregular migration and skilled migration as constructed categories (Raghuram, 2021) that systemically reproduce social hierarchies. “There is nothing matter of fact about the illegality of undocumented migrants... ‘Illegality’ is the product of immigration laws... the history of deliberate interventions,” writes De Genova (2004: 439). However, contemporary migration frameworks begin with the delineation of categories (de Haas et al., 2019;

Raghuram, 2021), particularly the legal/illegal binary, as part of its othering mechanisms. As (Kunz, 2020) argues in her discussion on the polyvalence of categories:

“Migration and its categories emerge as sites where racialised and class power relations are (re) produced or challenged, where ‘race’ is evoked discursively, enacted socially and produced materially and institutionally... it is also in and through their polysemy that migration categories emerge as sites and instruments for processes of racialisation” (Kunz, 2020: 2156).

It is important to contextualise these categories and bordering processes within a history of colonisation and how Europe positioned itself against racialised outsiders, intellectually and materially (Bhambra, 2014). Hall (2000) has argued that the differences constructed by racism operate at multiple levels. His work underscores the interconnectedness of racism, extending beyond biological registers to encompass cultural, ethnic, and religious dimensions. Through such discursive registers specific groups of people can be seen as distanced from modernity and, thus, lacking in any potential merit.

Several studies focus on how European colonial projects, built through the mobility and extraction of labour and resources, continue to shape migration policies today (Mayblin and Turner, 2021). While the Orient was ripe for ‘discovery’ and people and resources from the Global South were transferred to Northern/Western countries, reverse mobility was closely guarded through bordering institutions. “The tools used to police mobility that continue to expand and proliferate today were created and arranged to control racialised mobility,” argue Mayblin and Turner (2021:75). Furthermore, as “race categorised relations of power into hierarchies of humanity”, a temporal scale came into being, with modernity and development on one side and the ‘others’ as requiring intervention/development or incorporation (Mabylin and Turner, 2021:52). These hierarchies are evident in the modalities of inclusion and exclusion today, as contemporary migration categories carry forward colonial legacies of representation (Olier Jauregui and Spadavecchia (2022); Hamlin, 2021).

The influence of colonial and Eurocentric logics on the global discourse of Human Rights and asylum has had a lasting impact. Even the 1951 Geneva Convention only applied the right to asylum to those displaced *in Europe before 1951*. Displaced and persecuted people outside Europe were intentionally excluded from the framework of international rights (Mayblin, 2014). This essentially meant that “only Europeans were considered refugees until 1967” (Mayblin and Turner, 2021:116). It was only on the sustained insistence of the newly decolonised nations, including India, Pakistan and Afghanistan, that the revised protocol of 1967 added ‘others’ under the convention (Mayblin, 2014).

Even today, asylum seekers from the Global South are seen as dubious and potential labour migrants instead of “genuine” refugees (Hamlin, 2021; Crawley and Skelparis, 2018). This form of othering extends beyond the sphere of *asylum* and runs right through other migration categories as well. While white migrants are seen as ‘expats’ all others are clubbed into a broad-brush of immigrants and given differential rights to European nations (Kunz, 2020).

The language of racial and ethnic difference has given way to the more socially acceptable concept of skill and merit (Liu-Farrer et al., 2021). As we see in the case of the Ukrainian refugees, their deservingness is crouched in terms of better education levels and work-ready skills. Creating a dichotomy between deserving skilled refugees and unskilled hordes from the Global South sets the stage for hostile social discourse. Assumptions of skill impact the public perception of specific categories of migrants.

Naumann et al. (2018), in a survey on the attitudes towards highly skilled and low-skilled immigration in 15 European countries, found that native residents prefer highly skilled migrants. Połomska-Kimunguyi, 2022, in an analysis of the coverage of migration in British media, found:

“... coverage revolves around trauma and vulnerability, a tactic that ignores refugees’ ability to come up with solutions. Passive ‘migrants’ are understood as dependent on host countries’ benevolence; the news stories do not depict them as able, capable, competent, skilful, bright or gifted. By contrast, the stories portray Western Europeans as movers and shakers” (2022: 6).

Skill, as we see in the next section, is a handy category for both inclusion and exclusion, one that uses the discourse of merit to keep ‘undesirable’ migrants out.

The bordering work of skill

Building on scholarly work laying bare the “social construction of skill” (Liu-Farrer et al., 2021), we see how skills are valued through encounters with border regimes. Despite the proliferation of skilled migration pathways, for migrants from the Global South acceptance does not come easy.

In migration policy, skill is defined by the level of education or classification of occupation (Weinar and Klekowski von Koppenfels, 2020; Raghuram, 2021b). According to EU guidelines, someone with a tertiary level of education is typically considered highly skilled. “The definition of ‘skilled migrants’ is strongly based on existing demand (by markets, firms, states), instead of on skills per se, or the way they were acquired (Freitas et al., 2012:2). Most EU countries have preferential visa processes for sectors considered highly skilled, such as IT. With regard to which capacities are recognised as skill, migration regimes work within “a Cartesian hierarchy wherein skills are assessed economically, with ‘cognitive’ skills seen as separate and superior to ‘manual’ skills” (Iskander, 2017:238). In an analysis of the conditions of migrant workers in Qatar, Iskander (2017, 2021) points out how the expertise of workers in intricate building techniques was systemically dismissed. “As if the employers were disembodied worker expertise. They pulled the creativity, problem solving abilities and the capacity to learn out of the worker’s bodies and left them with raw muscle and sinew,” (2017:239).

Irregular migrants are largely homogenised as unskilled and undeserving (Hamlin, 2021). This hierarchy of skills is constructed across intersections of race, gender and class, among other factors (Liu-Farrer et al., 2021, Raghuram, 2021). The systemic undervaluing of skill by sector, by nature of skill or in terms of who embodies that skill, helps establish the category of low-skilled work and the unskilled worker along the lines of race and ethnicity; one who may legitimately be denied the same rights as others. In a study on the labour history of African-American workers in the US, Trotter Jr. (in Osterman et al., 2022) traces how the expertise of Black labourers was critical but they were stereotyped as unskilled and routinely paid less. “Racialised skill narratives and social practices helped to create and sustain the colour line in the American economy and heightened the exploitation of Black workers over several centuries” (2022:1359).

A seemingly neutral metric, skill works with a host of checks and balances. Education levels are an automatic filter for factors such as race and class (Tannock, 2011). The North/South boundaries, examined in legal constructions in the previous section, are reproduced when it comes to the discourse of merit. Raghuram (2021b) provides insights into the intricate relationship between skills and their geographies, highlighting that the meaning of skills is shaped by spatial and temporal dynamics. Not only

do contemporary alignments such as trade deals and international consortiums impact skilled mobility, historical and colonial continuities determine how skill is valued and who is excluded. Knowledge acquired in non-Western settings is also systemically undervalued (Raghuram, 2021b). This perspective underscores the systemic biases and inequalities that persist in the recognition and acknowledgment of skills, particularly those developed outside of Western settings. Such biases limit opportunities for individuals from non-Western backgrounds and perpetuate a hierarchy that privileges Western knowledge systems.

Values ascribed to assessments and specific sectors of skill also rely on the idea that skill and the capacity to acquire skills is inherent in some individuals and not context-dependent. Therefore, someone seen as unskilled may also be “characterised as not having fully developed the registers required for learning... By denying the unskilled the more abstract, more agentic, and more subjective registers of personhood, these representations reduce the unskilled down to their bodies,” writes Iskander (in Osterman et al., 2022:1360).

Denying skill also denies agency and removes capabilities and aspirations (de Haas et al., 2019) from the equation of irregular migration. Empirical studies have shown that migration is a perpetual process of learning – whether language (Spotti et al., 2019) or other forms of social/professional capital (Månsson and Delander, 2017). However, migrants are rarely lauded for acquiring new skills and instead seen to be doing the bare minimum to play catch-up with the native population (Piller and Takahashi, 2011). Unable to account for these nuances, skilled migration is a “scheme of limitations” (Borderon et al., 2021) which fails to recognise the skills inherent across categories of migrants.

In Belgium, migrants must undergo a series of steps in order to access the labour market – for instance mandatory civic orientation programmes, skill tests (cognitive, aptitude and others), language classes and so on⁶. Recognised refugees must also enrol at the public employment services (PES), where they can undergo trainings and get help with finding work – this however is more often likely to be in low-paid jobs requiring lower levels of education. As a report on the economic contribution of migrants in Belgium notes, the channel or category of migrants plays a critical role – with family migrants and those under international protection far less likely to have a job than labour migrants (NBB, 2020). Alongside structural hurdles in accessing the labour market, such as degree equalisations, work permits and long recognition processes, refugees are largely seen as lacking in labour market qualifications (NBB, 2020).

However, there is a curious cycle at play – while the labour market participation of asylum seekers and even refugees is limited by policies, they become dependent on the state, which, in turn, they are criticised for (Vandevoordt & Verschraegen, 2019).

Thus, skilled migration emerges as a construct just as much as irregular migration. To move past these limitations and argue for the recognition of skills among migrants in conditions of irregularity we posit that skill is central to any form of mobility. The objective is not to contend that skilled irregular migrants deserve preferential treatment in terms of asylum, but rather to investigate how migration systems are designed to undermine the value of all irregular migrants by labelling them as unskilled. We offer a more nuanced understanding of the dialectic between skills and categories of migration, especially emphasizing how the skills associated with irregular migration are rendered invisible or devalued though legal and policy interventions.

Study Design and Methodology

This paper is based on 34 semi-structured interviews conducted with settled irregular migrants in Belgium. Our respondents

arrived in Europe between 2005 and 2018 through irregular routes and subsequently applied for asylum or family reunification. Most had been living in Belgium for at least 5 years. Per migration policy, legal, tax-paying migrants can apply for Permanent Residence in most EU countries after five to ten years of residence. Taking on this critical but arbitrary timeline (Griffiths, 2014), we assume our respondents to be ‘settled’ irregular migrants, regardless of their legal status at the time of our conversation.

The interviews were conducted between 2020 and 2022, online and in person, and in keeping with safety regulations during the COVID-19 pandemic. Semi-structured interviews were based on a standardised questionnaire with open-ended questions (Magaldi and Berler, 2020) and conducted in Persian, Arabic, English, French, Pashto, and Turkish. An informed consent form was shared with all respondents and every effort was made to create a safe and comfortable interviewing environment (DiCicco-Bloom and Crabtree, 2006). We also spoke to several organisations working on migration and integration programmes, which included civil society groups that work with refugees and asylum seekers in Belgium and France (in Calais and Dunkirk). Some insights from experts have been mentioned in the article.

Given the pandemic, some interviews were conducted remotely (online or on the telephone) and others were held in outdoor spaces. Remote interviewing was both a limitation and an opportunity. While it limited us to respondents who were relatively settled and had access to the internet, it also gave us access to people who may otherwise have not been available. Respondents also had a certain degree of control and comfort during the conversations. For instance, they could opt to keep their cameras off, several spoke to us from their homes, and a few even showed us certain items with stories connected to their journeys.

To flesh out the broad commonalities between our diverse sample, we first adopted thematic coding using NVivo. The first set of codes focussed on migrant trajectories and decision-making moments. As factors such as time, skill, education, and future aspirations began to recur across themes, we looked for these patterns within specific phases of the migration journey (pre-departure, en route and in Europe).

Our respondents include 25 men and 9 women, aged between 5 and 30 at the time of first migration into Europe. They are from Afghanistan, Ghana, Guinea, India, Palestine, Syria, Tibet, Togo and Turkey. Our sample corresponds broadly to patterns of asylum migration in Belgium, however data from previous years is hard to come by (Bircan et al., 2020). In Table 1 (below), we see the top ten countries of origin of asylum applicants in Belgium between 2020 and 2021. People of Afghan, Syrian and Palestinian

Table 1 Top ten countries of origin of people who filed for international protection in Belgium.

Country of origin	2020	Country of origin	2021
Afghanistan	3,014	Afghanistan	6,505
Syria	1,725	Syria	2,874
Iraq	864	Palestine	1,662
Eritrea	832	Eritrea	1,558
Palestine	788	Somalia	116
Somalia	747	Iraq	941
Turkey	671	Guinea	745
Guinea	656	Turkey	658
El Salvador	538	Georgia	593
Albania	447	Albania	588
Other countries	6,538	Other countries	8,730
Total	16,910	Total	25,971

origin make up about one third of the total applications, while applicants of Turkish and Guinean origin are almost 10%.

Irregularity, which is the central theme of our discussion, appears in myriad ways. Most respondents arrived as undocumented migrants, some arrived on fake visas/passports while some had valid temporary Schengen visas. A small number arrived as students and some as family migrants of legally recognised refugees. In terms of education levels, individuals travelling as adults were likely to have at least a high school degree. Very few of our respondents came directly to Belgium. Most spent a considerable period in transit countries before attempting to cross the Mediterranean.

To protect the identities of our respondents we have pseudonymised them and used unrelated initials. We avoid mentioning their country of origin, unless essential to the narrative. Some key information has been changed (such as specific profession) if it posed a threat of identification.

In the next three sections, we share vignettes from our interviews and examine how skills – existing and acquired – shaped the migration trajectories of our respondents. We analyse how individual capacities are shaped against the backdrop of restrictive borders and constructions of illegality throughout the migration trajectory.

Unrecognised degrees, invisible skills. The policy-based understanding of skill as schooling, degree acquisition and professional, intellectual expertise fits a significant share of our respondents prior to migration. Respondents who left their home countries as adults had at least a high school diploma, several had college degrees and some years of work experience. Underage migrants had often been in school for years as well. For others, the idea of ‘skills’ – as schooling, vocational training and, subsequently, better working conditions was central to how irregular migration was imagined and experienced. Those who left as young children recall educational opportunities as being one of the central drivers of their parents’ decisions to migrate (or have their children migrate).

“I first gave the baccalaureate’s exam in 2011 around the start of the revolution... I couldn’t complete it because the city had begun to face problems, we had to escape during one exam. In 2012, I passed the exam while the situation was getting worse, I can describe it as bloody. There was a war in the region where I used to live and the regime had completely taken over...”

“I had to return to high school. Without the diploma, I wouldn’t have been able to apply to universities anywhere. And, if we travelled and I didn’t have my high school diploma, I would be forced to enter vocational schools ...”

Both the respondents quoted here left their home countries around 2013–2015, amid growing religious persecution and escalating violence in the Middle East. As resources became scarce even in towns far from the epicentre of violence, daily life became difficult. Despite the circumstances, some cities made an effort to keep schools running and even conduct exams when possible. One respondent said that his family hoped to go to Europe and believed that his high school degree would be recognised there.

The personal experiences of our respondents challenge the assumption of a lack of education and professional aspiration among undocumented migrants. On the contrary, we see that education *drives* irregular migration. Even when it comes to South-South migration. VT, who belonged to a persecuted religious community in a small country, explained that those

who could afford it would often migrate to a neighbouring nation for a few years so that their children could access ‘good’ schools and, possibly, an opportunity to later move on to the UK or the US.

Unfortunately, the transition of qualifications is not straightforward. Irregularity notwithstanding, not all non-European degrees are automatically recognised. In several cases, people are required to take skills tests or undergo degree equalisation procedures so experts can ascertain their ‘level’ of skill/education. This is an expensive and time-consuming process, accessible only after someone is legally recognised as a refugee. This process can entail down-skilling as well. What we see throughout our interviews is a mismatch between the potential our respondents see in themselves and how they felt seen by the authorities and potential employers. What seems to rankle more is that by refusing to acknowledge their present qualifications, their dreams are dismissed as well.

JL, an engineer by training, made his way to Europe with some people who were engineers as well. He recalls that they left Belgium because they felt their qualifications were invisible to the authorities. “They said that during the interviews no one even asked them what they could do or wanted to do.”

Once individuals are legally recognised as refugees, they must participate in a mandatory Civic Integration course and enrol for language classes. For AL, this was a frustrating experience.

“They wanted me to stay in the country for a year and do nothing. Anyway, I did the integration programme in Turkish. It was very trivial, frankly. For two days, someone was explaining to us what the blue garbage bag was for and what the red garbage bag was for. I mean, we had been living in group housing, we knew all this. They didn’t talk about other things like ‘what are your dreams?’”

Recognised refugees are connected to social services and public employment offices. One is contingent upon the other, as beneficiaries of state support must prove that they are either in training for work or actively looking for work. Some respondents felt they were often pushed towards low-skilled jobs. A 39-year-old respondent who spoke multiple languages and had 11 years of experience as a lawyer says he got no help from the agency, “I kept asking them what I can do, I got no answer from them.”

According to other respondents who have had encounters with public employment services, there is little recognition of their qualifications or past experience and the focus is only on getting paid work. PT, an analyst who came to Belgium as a political refugee, felt local PES struggle with refugees with higher education.

“Yeah, they didn’t help them [his acquaintances] ... They have trouble with the language right, even though they have higher education they couldn’t work in that kind of job, like white collar jobs, but they could work like blue collar jobs, mostly. I mean my brother-in-law is also here. And he works as a driver for someone, for a while... that kind of jobs mostly.”

Another respondent, whose wife had even completed a degree in Belgium, says her experience with the PES was harrowing and all they could suggest for her were cleaning jobs.

These anecdotes also alert us to the vast heterogeneity in skill levels among irregular migrants that sweeping discourses seem to miss. While education and labour market participation are a key concern for most migrants, they face barriers through the very institutions designed to help them.

Furthermore, we see how the differential value of skill comes into play, with foreign qualifications seen as somehow dubious and in need of extra scrutiny. This echoes Liu-Farrer et al. (2021)

that seemingly measurable proficiencies are rife with markers of race, ethnicity, gender.

While this section assessed how education and skill drive migration and post-migration opportunities, in the next section we examine how encounters throughout irregular migration continue to shape skills.

Skills – constructed through encounters. A lot has been written about deskilling, underemployment, unemployment and the loss of social and professional capital caused by migration. Migrants are seen as passive recipients of this loss and must undergo training, retraining, and skills acquisition to bolster against this condition. From mentoring programmes to labour market activations, programmes that link migrants to the work floor abound. However, this depiction is significantly flawed as it perpetuates the notion that newcomers inherently lack skills (which we have challenged in the previous section) and implies that actionable skills can only be acquired after migration into Europe. Instead, our findings reveal a much more nuanced reality – not only are skills dynamic and constantly shaped in transition, but there is also a mobility to skills and their relevance, which fluctuates at different stages based on a multitude of factors. This highlights the complex nature of skill acquisition and mobility, debunking the oversimplified and static assumption of skills.

If the capacity to learn is a critical aspect of skilled migration (or skill implicit in migration), irregular migration trajectories have a large share of learning encounters – both formal and informal – especially while in transit. When first escaping from their home countries, most of our respondents spent considerable time in neighbouring countries such as Turkey, Iran, Morocco, India, Thailand, Libya, and Ivory Coast among others. Those who lived in transit spaces as minors attended school if they could – either local schools, if they were allowed to attend as refugees, or schools run by aid workers and NGOs.

MD, a respondent who was living in a refugee camp with his family in Turkey for a few years, recalls that they could not attend local schools as no one was allowed to leave the camp. However, his mother and several others rallied to have schools opened on the site.

“We wanted to learn, we wanted to open schools in the camps. We didn’t want our lives to stop. My mother and a few teachers opened the first school for refugees there. They allowed us to learn Turkish and told us if we could learn Turkish they may let us go to university. It was like a challenge to me. I wanted to prove that I’m a human being just like any Turkish person or anyone else who can learn and go out. They actually gave us five months to learn the language.”

We return to MD’s story later in this paper but must note that he managed to pass enough levels of Turkish to receive special permission to study at a local university. There is no doubt among our respondents that knowledge is their road to empowerment. Throughout their journey to Europe (and even after arriving in Belgium) acquiring new skills is a matter of survival and a window to future aspirations.

Language is one of the most critical aspects of reskilling. JH mentions how he learnt English while living in a camp in Libya as English was the common language among the migrants there. For another respondent, learning English allowed him to communicate with border authorities and barter translation services in exchange for food and favours. AN, a respondent who moved to Belgium as a child recalls her mother learning both Dutch and French while working as a cleaner and looking after four young children.

“People from West Africa easily pick up three to five languages. My mom was born in [...], but she went to her uncle’s [house] in another country. [She spoke] four

African languages perfectly and some dialects... She used to speak French... and did the classes also when she came here. She wanted to work. She had four kids, so she did everything, learnt Dutch too.”

Besides learning new languages, which several of our respondents spoke of, there were a whole gamut of skills that they acquired en route. Informal skills – quick thinking, survival instincts, bartering, teamwork and trust building, gut and grit – were important in every migrant journey shared with us. The ability to access information through social media, networks or research was critical and several respondents learnt how to access these digital spaces while en route. Those who arrived around 2015 were more likely to have access to social media, smart phones, and internet. Even those without prior knowledge of social media became handy with Chat groups, Facebook and maps. Our respondents were also relatively well-versed with European policies and legalese that applied to their specific cases.

As we shine the spotlight on skills acquisition en route, we see that ground reality is complicated. There is a constant fluctuation in skill throughout migration journeys, with different encounters valuing and devaluing individual proficiency. While migrants acquire specific skills en route, being on the move for years creates gaps in formal education that are difficult to make up for. An expert from a civil society organisation that works with migrants passing through Calais explained that several people they meet have attended school for a fair number of years in transit countries or before the conflict in their home countries began. However, the long and arduous journey to Europe and within Europe, long periods in detention centres and on the road put them well behind their age cohort.

This resonates with the story of JH, who left his country in Africa as a child, for the promise of education.

“He [the smuggler] said it in our language ‘white people’s country’. He told me, ‘If you reach there, everything is okay’. I am going to go to school ... get everything... ‘You come back home like this [and] you will come and take your family’”.

The outcome of his journey was unexpected as JH found himself stuck in Libya, forced into indentured labour, and then in a camp in Italy for a long time. He has now been trying for asylum in Belgium for three years and has been unable to attend schools.

UB, who was studying to be a doctor before his family fled, had to change tracks to administrative services after arriving in Belgium. His story charts the ups and downs in skills and aspirations throughout his two-year long journey to the country.

“My dream is to be a doctor. This was my dream since I was a child. I wanted to start studying medicine immediately, but it was very hard. Unfortunately, the long break [over the course of migration] from studying had a lot of influence on my knowledge in math, physics and chemistry. After I came here, I studied in school, and the most important thing I feel is that I managed to learn the language in a short period of time. I went to secondary school with Belgians and I got good grades and I got my diploma from Belgium so for me this is a big accomplishment but at the same time I still don’t feel like I got to where I want to be.”

For UB, being on the road not only impacted his mental and physical well-being, but also his proficiency in basic subjects. The uphill climb was so steep that he abandoned his dream of becoming a doctor to studying for an administrative role.

The waiting period caused by migration regimes is another period of intense deskilling. For our respondents the long wait for asylum had severe consequences. “My life only began after three

years. The first three years do not count in my existence,” said one respondent.

A similar story is narrated by MG, who arrived as an asylum seeker around the age of 25. Having graduated in economics and worked previously as a sales representative, MG also worked in Turkey for some time before coming to Belgium. He spent 2015–2019 trying for asylum, finishing the paperwork as a refugee, then learnt French and followed a training trajectory sponsored by the public employment office. It was only in 2019 that he got his first job in Belgium – that too on a short term contract. It is difficult to qualify his time as one of reskilling because it was also marked by a lack of recognition of his existing skill and, over-time, a loss of skills.

Encounters such as these are rarely acknowledged in the scant data about the labour market integration of migrants, which largely establishes paradigms of mismatch and lack of relevant skills (NBB, 2020). What migrants narrate, instead, is how they encounter a system that needs them to level-up, regardless of professional expertise or prior education. This often means extra years at school, a lengthy internship period or an entry level job where they can prove their worthiness.

Among the women we interviewed, the experiences were manifold. Some had high levels of education and work experience back home, and two respondents spoke of their mothers as the primary breadwinner after migration. We also encountered a double-edged barrier when it came to skills acquisition: from within the migrant community and in the host society. Respondents spoke of how their legal position, lack of recognition and stereotypes about women impacted their encounters with local Belgians. At the same time, some felt held back into gendered roles by their immediate families as well.

What our findings reveal is that the question of skills among migrants and labour market integration is also one about the systems migrants encounter. Particularly, the epistemic construct of skill that is designed to exclude or render invisible proficiency acquired in the Global South and gendered discourses that further distance women from participation in manifold ways.

Skilling is a never-ending, dynamic process that often must take place alongside unimaginable hardships and threat to life. The physical and mental fortitude that fuels people on such journeys is never valorised. Recalling his boat crossing across the Mediterranean, one respondent said that boats – inflatable rubber boats – could rupture and sink and people who could swim may have a higher chance of surviving until help could arrive. Several respondents reported walking long distances with limited food and water. Even once in Europe, they live in extreme deprivation, especially if they avoid reaching out to civil society actors in fear of deportation. Yet, the severe consequences on mental health are seen as an outcome of individual choice. In a heightened climate of securitisation, migrant bodies are not celebrated for surviving, but denigrated for making the journey in the first place. The overarching discourse is often shaped by their position as refugees. As one respondent said, she was happy to have had a chance to build a life in Belgium, however,

“Being here in this country is a lot about connecting with citizens and telling them that we are not bad people, that we came here only because of war and insecurity. We want to live and work in peace.”

In the following section, we return to the conjunction between the category of irregularity, illegality and skill and unpack the ways in which this disadvantages migrants.

Irregularity, illegality and skill. Let’s return to MD, the young migrant mentioned in a previous section, who learnt Turkish well

enough to land a job as a tourist guide in Istanbul. However, as he got better at his job and began to dream of doing something more, his position as a refugee in Turkey became more and more of a hurdle. He explained that as per law, he would never have been allowed to become a citizen, and given the growing xenophobia against migrants, he would only find precarious, ad hoc work. That is when he decided to find a way to reach Europe. Europe, from what he understood from those around him, offered him a chance at legal recognition. A chance to “make something” of his life.

MD’s story is not unique, but it illustrates how the specific construct of illegality (De Genova, 2004) takes on layers in conjunction with skills. Respondents who went to school in camps expressed similar frustrations, as they realised that living in limbo would be a lifelong state of going nowhere. For older migrants, this also meant an inability to access good jobs and for children, after a certain age, no more opportunities for schooling. As summarised by BF, who attended school in Iran for a few years after her family first fled there:

“It is difficult to live in a country without an identity”.

Being stuck as “illegal” or “undocumented” has ramifications on aspirations as “good” jobs were hard to come by. One respondent, who lived in a camp, said that even though his life was not under threat, conditions were very difficult and there was nowhere to go. No future to shape. “For us, Europe was where we could dream.” These dreams were conveyed by most respondents through terms such as “papers”, “legal”, “ID card”, “passport”; words that hinted at something they were hoping for while coming to Europe.

These narratives fly in the face of assumptions around irregular migrants as social security hunters and highlight the core desire to be where their skills and potential can be recognised and fulfilled.

However, despite the idea of Human Rights and equal opportunity that migrants believe awaits them in the EU, what they first encounter are regimes where legal status trumps ability. Regardless of education or proficiency, being undocumented and denied a work permit meant an automatic downgrading of skills. Migrants without legal papers are forced to accept whatever they can find and settle for the lowest pay and the worst working conditions. One respondent, VS, a high school graduate, stayed on in Belgium after his asylum application was rejected. He spent years in temporary jobs such as car washing and cleaning for minimum pay, surviving on street smarts and social contacts. In Belgium, language classes are mandatory for legally recognised newcomers and accessible to someone in an asylum procedure. When VS applied for asylum in Brussels, he started learning French. Once his application was rejected, he could no longer access classes and tried learning informally but couldn’t do much. “Without language we are nobody,” he said.

Like him, other respondents who spent years in transit found themselves in grey areas emotionally, legally and professionally. The time our respondents arrived in Europe to the time they were recognised as legal residents of Belgium varied considerably – but only a few of them had quick journeys. For most it was a matter of months and years. Some worked en route to save money to pay for further passage, one respondent was forced by smugglers to work in a factory for months. While the law makes it difficult, if not near impossible, for rejected asylum seekers and those who haven’t started the process, to work legally, they must work to survive. Easy to exploit and unlikely to report unfair working conditions, irregular migrants are cheap labour in gig economies and large factories and farms across the country.

For individuals already living in legal limbo, the stasis induced by the COVID-19 pandemic also meant an abrupt stop to their

skills acquisition and professional trajectories. Respondents who were either in training or in precarious work, were either out of work or forced into online classes, which further distanced them from opportunity. One of our respondents graduated with a master's degree in 2020 and said he dreamt of becoming a diplomat one day. However, at the time of our interview towards the end of the year, he was still looking for work.

“So far, I had no success and my future is dark and bleak. I certainly have a bright future but I have to be patient because we are going through some uncertain times because of Covid-19. Perhaps whenever the situation gets normal, I will be able to find a job.”

Despite his words, he is not very optimistic: “Because it's not an easy task. No matter how educated you are you have to start from zero, make new networks, make new relationships...”

Studies cited earlier in the paper (Iskander, 2021; Piller and Takahashi, 2011; Purkayastha & Bircan, 2023) alert us to how being relegated to a category of the unwanted and unskilled denies a recognition of current capabilities and, as we examine, creates conditions where labour for survival pay is the only option. With such outcomes, legal constructs such as the work permit and even the right to work becomes a bordering process – one that maintains a social, racial hierarchy by establishing control over the productivity of non-native bodies. “It is deportability, not deportation per se, that has historically rendered the undocumented migrant labour a distinctly disposable commodity,” writes De Genova (2004: 438).

Unfavourable conditions and rigid categories of differential access to rights and access are not only tolerated but also exacerbated by migration regimes that leave people with no choice but to work in abysmal conditions to survive. Civil society experts we interviewed over the course of our research emphatically reiterate that such border regimes, heightened security and extreme policies against irregular migrants do not deter individuals and families desperate to build a safer, better life, instead they only make their lives even more difficult and dangerous.

Moving forward: A framework of equal access over skill. This paper starts out with the premise that irregular migration from the Global South is systemically and discursively separated from skilled migration. This framework of seeing and representing people as economic resources “lays the groundwork for the category of the unskilled” (Iskander in Osterman et al., 2022: 10). These are people who can be denied basic rights and freedoms (Fox-Ruhs and Ruhs, 2022; Iskander, 2021). Embedded in colonial continuities, this allows a racialised us-and-them notion of deservingness to perpetuate, which makes harsh anti-immigrant policies seem like a rational choice. Irregular migrants are seen through frames of undesirability that are reiterated in legal processes, evaluations of skill and intervention programmes post-migration.

Bridging the divide between irregular mobility and skill alerts us to a more nuanced and dynamic understanding of how capacities shape migration and vice-versa. Our findings challenge rigid migration categories, particularly labels such as “refugee” and “migrant”, which carry embedded socio-political meanings (Abdelaaty and Hamlin, 2022). Instead, we observe a continuum of aspirations impacted by varying levels of access to schooling, employment and economic resources. We also see that people can aspire for a life of dignity alongside their desperate search for safety from violence.

Education, we find, drives irregular migration – for some the desire for education makes Europe attractive and for others being

educated makes Europe possible. To those with higher levels of education who are stuck in limbo in camps and transit countries, Europe seems to offer an opportunity to fulfil their potential. All respondents understand that education and acquiring new skills is the key to empowering themselves, while en route and once in Europe. This highlights the need to move beyond simplistic categorisations that currently inform migration policies. It is crucial to acknowledge that irregular migrants are human beings with aspirations, rights, and the potential to contribute positively to their host societies.

Our study also highlights the vast heterogeneity in the competencies among migrants across age, gender and schooling and how this impacts decision making. This contradicts the generalised approach to irregular migrants and calls for a more layered approach in post-migration processes. For recognised migrants, interactions with labour market interventions can be racialised encounters where their existing capabilities are dismissed and they are told to retrain, acquire local degrees, start internships or entry level jobs. For migrants in conditions of irregularity even that is not possible and they are forced take whatever they can get regardless of what they can do. Skills, we find, exist, but can be systemically rejected.

Individual capacities and skill levels are also responsive to encounters while in transit. There is an ebb and flow to skills based on journeys, recognition, and geographies. Border crossings, transit encounters, detention, living in camps – all these temporal phases impact proficiency – while some people acquire new skills, for others it is a period of intense deskilling.

The construction of illegality (De Genova, 2004) also maintains a racialised socioeconomic hierarchy. Contrary to common sense, irregular migrants do not find themselves in precarious, low-paying work because of a lack of aspiration or skill on their part; this is often a direct outcome of the legal processes and the lack of speedy, safe legalisation pathways that render individuals undocumented or *sans papiers*. Being in this position leaves them no choice but to take the lowest-paying jobs with the least security. This underscores the need for a comprehensive understanding of the multifaceted dynamics involved in the formation and utilisation of skills among migrants.

Our study was limited to respondents who felt safe enough to share their experiences with us. Several others still in fear of deportation or exploitation by employers were hesitant to do so. As we reached out to respondents through social media and snowballing, our sample largely includes those with access to technology and a certain level of education. Furthermore, our analysis has only begun to explore the gendered intersections within skilled irregular migration. There is much more to uncover in terms of how imaginaries and the materiality of post-colonial connections shape the journey to Europe. Further research is also necessary to deepen our understanding of how racial hierarchies are sustained through differential rights and access granted to different categories of migrants.

Moving forward, it is not enough to collect and collate the education levels of irregular migrants, what is needed is to reframe the representation of migrants in categories, policy and the media. Instead of the racialised other, who is either vulnerable or violent, policies need to make room for nuanced human beings, with potential and aspiration and equal right to a safer, fulfilling life. Instead of bolstering systems that perpetuate vulnerability and exploitation, there is a call for policies that prioritise the well-being and human rights of all individuals, regardless of their migration status.

Perhaps most critically, this paper colours in some grey spots in the black-and-white binaries of migration, bringing human dynamism into notions of legal/illegal; labour migrant/refugee; and calls for reimagining the category of skilled migration. By

embracing the complexity and blurring the rigid boundaries between categories, we attempt to foster a more inclusive and just approach to migration.

Data availability

The datasets generated during and/or analysed during the current study are stored in secure servers with restricted access only to the researchers for a stipulated amount of time. In keeping with the ethics and privacy guidelines and the consent from participants, the data is not publicly shared.

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Notes

- 1 IOM definition: <https://www.iom.int/key-migration-terms>.
- 2 In this paper, the term irregular migrant refers to any individual crossing international borders with the intention to file for asylum and/or stay in Europe for a considerable duration of time. Furthermore, we do not make a distinction in terms of motivation and drivers, and acknowledge that “underdevelopment, conflict, and, by extension, economic and forced migration are closely linked... threats to an individual’s personal integrity can also go hand-in-hand with dismantled economies and lack of economic opportunities” (Crawley and Skelparis, 2018: 52–53).
- 3 The International Centre for Migration Policy Development reported a 57% rise in irregular migration – a “rebound to pre-pandemic levels”. <https://www.icmpd.org/news/migration-outlook-report-57-rise-in-2021-irregular-migration-growing-crises-at-borders-and-key-elections-signal-eu-migration-pivot-in-2022>.
- 4 Getting Ukrainian refugees into work: the importance of early competence checks <https://www.icmpd.org/blog/2022/getting-ukrainian-refugees-into-work-the-importance-of-early-competence-checks>. Interventions often stressed the need for fast-tracked competence checks and quick labour market access.
- 5 The term ‘Global South’ is used as a discursive indicator for non-Western countries in this paper. As Walter Dignolo writes in *The Global South and World Disorder*, “The Global South is not a geographic location rather it is a metaphor of the world at the receiving end of globalisation and suffering the consequences... It is the places on the planet that endured the experience of coloniality, that suffered and still suffer the consequences of the colonial world.” (Mignolo, 2011:183–185).
- 6 Each category of migrant is granted differential access to the labour market. This holds true for sub-categories of people under international protection as well. For an overview of the work permit regulations for refugees in different categories of acceptance: <https://asylumineurope.org/reports/country/belgium/content-international-protection/employment-and-education/access-labour-market/>.

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Competing interests

The authors declare no competing interests.

Ethical approval

This research project has received approval from the legal and ethics committee of the project and affiliated university. The data in this study has been pseudonymised to ensure privacy and safety of the respondents.

Informed consent

A detailed informed consent form was shared with participants prior to the interview, which detailed how the data will be protected and shared. Interviews were conducted only after explicit consent.

Additional information

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