

Empower, Protect, Represent: Eliminating Barriers for Migrant Women in Politics

Thurs 21 November 2024 | 9:00 - 13:00 | Amazone House, Rue du Méridien 10, Brussels 1210, Belgium

This event will be held in English and French, and simultaneous translation will be available.

Background and Rationale

Migrant women in Europe represent a dynamic and growing demographic, offering invaluable perspectives and contributions across all sectors of society. However, their political representation remains strikingly limited at all levels—from local councils to regional governments, national parliaments, and the European Parliament. The 2024 European elections highlighted this stark reality: **only 37 out of 720 Members of the European Parliament (MEPs) come from ethnic and racialised backgrounds**, underscoring the enduring barriers that impede diversity in European politics. Furthermore, women now account for just 38.5% of MEPs, a 2.1% decrease from the previous legislature, marking the steepest decline in female representation since the first direct elections in 1979.

This **political underrepresentation of both migrant communities and women limits the range of perspectives** and ideas that could otherwise enrich political discourse and decision-making. More significantly, it undermines Europe's democratic values, rooted in diversity, inclusion, and equal participation for all citizens. With migration, integration, and gender equality high on the European political agenda, the lack of migrant women's voices in shaping the policies that affect their lives raises critical concerns about fairness and the strength of democratic governance.

In addition to structural barriers such as discrimination, insufficient access to political mentorship, and a lack of support networks, one of the most pervasive obstacles migrant women face in politics is gender-based violence. **Women who enter public life, particularly those from marginalised or migrant backgrounds, are disproportionately targeted by violence**, harassment, and intimidation, both online and offline. This violence acts as a direct deterrent to political participation, silencing women's voices and perpetuating their exclusion from decision-making spaces. Gender-based violence against women in politics is not only a violation of individual rights but a significant barrier to democratic participation and gender equality.

As we mark the **International Day for the Elimination of Violence Against Women**, it is critical to recognise that violence against women in politics is a structural issue that impedes progress on multiple fronts. Migrant women, already marginalised by their ethnic, racial, or migrant status, face an additional layer of violence that discourages them from pursuing political careers or participating in public debates. This violence undermines democratic institutions by restricting diversity of thought and representation, ultimately weakening the inclusivity of political systems. Addressing this issue requires targeted

interventions to ensure that women, particularly migrant women, can participate safely in political life without fear of violence or retribution.

At the regional and local levels in Belgium, the situation is equally concerning. **Migrant women play essential roles in community life and grassroots political activism, yet their presence in formal political spaces remains minimal.** This disconnect suggests that structural barriers, including the threat of gender-based violence, continue to hinder their political engagement. Women often face harassment or violence when they seek leadership roles in local politics, and these threats disproportionately affect women of colour or those from migrant backgrounds. This violence creates an environment where migrant women are discouraged from entering or remaining in politics, further entrenching their exclusion.

The WE-EMPOWER project aims to address this critical issue by hosting a panel discussion focused on **confronting the political marginalisation of migrant women at the European, regional, and local levels.** In the context of the International Day for the Elimination of Violence Against Women, the panel will also explore how gender-based violence acts as a structural barrier to political participation. This event will serve as a platform to raise awareness among policymakers, civil society organisations, and migrant women leaders about the dual challenges of political exclusion and violence. By identifying these barriers and fostering cross-sector collaboration, the panel discussion will generate actionable policy recommendations and strategies for increasing migrant women's participation in politics, while also addressing the gender-based violence that continues to silence women in the political arena.

Provisional Agenda

Time	Agenda Item
9:00 - 9:45	Registration and Breakfast
9:45 - 10:00	Opening Remarks , Marcela de la Peña Valdivia, Chaska
10:00 - 10:15	Project Presentation , Gea Meijers, Secretariat Coordinator, WIDE+ Followed by 5 mins for Q&A
10:15 - 11:45	<p>Panel: Pathways to Participation and Ending Violence Against Migrant Women in Politics</p> <ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Shada Islam, EU Affairs Commentator & Founder of New Horizons Project • Lailuma Sadid, ULB Research Assistant, Journalist, EU Election Candidate 2024 • Cecilia Torres, Municipal Councilor, Ottignies-Louvain-la-Neuve, ECOLO Party <p>Moderator: Emma Rainey, WE-EMPOWER Project Coordinator at WIDE+</p> <p>The discussion will be followed by a 30-minute Q&A session</p>
11:45 - 12:00	Closing Remarks , Amancaye Gastorres, Collectif de Femmes
12:00 - 13:00	Lunch and Networking

About WE-EMPOWER and the Organisers

[WE-EMPOWER](#) is a 2.5-year transnational collaboration that aims to empower migrant women, including gender non-conforming persons, to participate actively in civic and democratic life in Europe. Commencing in April 2022, the project unites seven women-led and migrant women-led organisations across Europe with a shared mission to protect migrant women's rights. It is co-funded by the European Union's ERASMUS+ programme. Key outcomes of WE-EMPOWER include a study and a survey on migrant women's democratic participation in several European countries, a toolkit and an online “treasure box” of educational materials to promote engagement. Activities to achieve these results include international training, project meetings, and multiplier events, both in-person and online, designed to disseminate the project's findings and tools widely.

[WIDE+ \(Women In Development Europe+\)](#) is a European feminist network advocating for women's rights as part of a broader fight for social justice, sustainable livelihoods, and human rights. By challenging European policies, WIDE+ promotes intersectional feminist movements and works in solidarity with global South feminists. WIDE+ initiatives focus on migrant women's rights, feminist economics, gender and trade issues, and youth-driven feminist campaigns. We emphasise the importance of international collaboration to create a fairer world where people's well-being and ecology are prioritised over profit. WIDE+ is currently leading several EU-funded projects, including the WE-EMPOWER project.

The [Collectif des Femmes](#) de Louvain-la-Neuve, founded in 1979, is a leading advocate for equality, social justice, and women's rights, particularly for migrants and refugees, in Belgium and the Global South. As a recognised centre for socio-professional integration, lifelong education, and creativity, it promotes social action and equal opportunities in the Walloon Region. With a team of 34 staff, 10 collaborators, and 30 volunteers—90% of whom are immigrant women—the collective fosters intercultural exchange and empowerment. Rooted in the courageous activism of migrant women, the collective has evolved into a powerful force for social inclusion and continues to promote the socio-economic and political integration of women, migrants, and refugees.

[Chaska](#) is a feminist organisation founded on egalitarian, ecological, and humanitarian principles. Committed to promoting human rights, gender equality, and sustainable development, it strives to empower women from diverse backgrounds, especially migrants, by fostering their skills and creating spaces for their advancement. Chaska actively works to integrate gender perspectives into public policies, offers specialised training on gender issues, and conducts action-based research. It also seeks to elevate the visibility and contributions of women throughout history, culture, and the arts. Through targeted advocacy campaigns, Chaska challenges violence and discrimination against women, championing the right to justice, education, health, and genuine equality for all.

About the Speakers

Cecilia Torres

Speaker



Cecilia Torres has served as a Municipal Councillor for the city of Ottignies-Louvain-la-Neuve since 2018 and was re-elected in October 2024. A committed representative of the ECOLO party, Cecilia brings a strong background in sociology and applied sciences, holding a master's degree from the University of Leuven. Her professional journey includes extensive work in Ecuador, where she collaborated with various NGOs and the United Nations Development Programme (UNDP). A lifelong ecofeminist, Cecilia is the founder of a women's organisation focused on promoting political participation and providing training for elected women. She extends this commitment in Belgium by supporting migrant women through her work with the Women's Collective. Within ECOLO, she also serves as a substitute parliamentarian for the Walloon Region.

Lailuma Sadid

Speaker



Lailuma Sadid is an accomplished professional with extensive experience in journalism, diplomacy, and advocacy. Since 2022, she has served as a Research Assistant at the Faculty of Journalism at ULB. Concurrently, she works as a Freelance Journalist for outlets such as Brussels Morning and Media Latitudes Belgium, enhancing her influence in European media. Lailuma is deeply invested in Afghan diaspora issues, chairing the Network of the Afghan Diaspora in Europe (NADOE) from 2020 to 2024, where she worked tirelessly to amplify Afghan voices across Europe. She co-founded CLIAB in 2023 to further support Afghan communities internationally. Since 2020, she has also served as a Facilitator for UNHCR Belgium, aiding the integration of refugees and asylum seekers, a role reflecting her humanitarian commitment. Her career in diplomacy is notable; from 2009 to 2012, she served as a Diplomat at the Embassy of Afghanistan in Belgium, representing Afghan interests at NATO summits and the London Conference. Earlier, she reported on Afghan issues for Pajhwok News Agency. In 2024, Lailuma stood as a candidate in the European election for DÉFI in Belgium, underscoring her dedication to advocating for Afghan and diaspora interests at a broader level.

Shada Islam

Speaker



Shada Islam is an award-winning and well-known Brussels-based analyst and commentator on EU affairs who now works independently as an advisor/analyst/strategist/op-ed writer on Europe-Africa-Asia Geopolitics, Trade, and Race, Diversity and Inclusion. Her columns are published in the EU Observer, the Guardian and Hyphen Online. Shada worked for nine years as Director of Europe and Geopolitics at Friends of Europe. She now runs her own Brussels-based global media, strategy and advisory company, New Horizons Project. Shada is a senior advisor at the European Policy Centre and Bursons, a renowned international communication firm, and a visiting professor at the College of Europe. Politico identified her as one of Brussels' 20 most influential women in 2017. In 2023 and 2024, she was on the ZN Consulting list of 50 top influencers. Shada has won a European of the Year in Media award from the European Movement International and a prize for her work on building an inclusive Union of Equality from the Association of European Journalists of Catalonia. She is also an “ambassador” for the Brussels Binder, a women-led directory of women experts.

Emma Rainey

Moderator



Emma Rainey is the WE-EMPOWER Project Coordinator and oversees the Gender and Migration working group at WIDE+. Having worked in the Brussels civil society sector for over a decade, Emma has been involved in several feminist and gender equality projects. This includes co-founding Young Feminist Europe, campaigning for reproductive rights in Ireland with BXL-Irish for Choice, as well as working as the Project Coordinator of the EU-funded Brussels Binder Beyond project. Emma is a current Board Member of 50:50 NI where she has produced research on women’s electoral participation in Northern Ireland politics. In addition to project management, Emma often works as an independent researcher and gender analyst. Her most recent work involves analysing gender equality actions in the EU ahead of the 2024 elections for Oxfam International. Her research interests also extend to the gender dimensions of housing insecurity and digital gender-based violence. Emma has a Master's in Criminology from KU Leuven and an Executive Master's in EU Project Management & Design from the Europa Business School. She is currently completing the Gender Studies – Intersectionality and Change Master’s from Linköping University.