

## Voices from immigrant's search for security and social protection in Lisbon, Portugal

### Vozes de imigrantes à procura de segurança e proteção social em Lisboa, Portugal

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#### Abstract

This article aims to reveal the experiences of immigrants living in Lisbon and examines how the Portuguese social welfare system supports the welfare needs of immigrants. Portugal operates a mixed welfare system where the state finances semi-formal and informal networks operating at macro, meso, and micro levels, and these combine to address immigrants' challenges. This is a qualitative in-depth study, that focused on eight English-speaking immigrants who use welfare services in two non-governmental organisations in Lisbon. We wanted to know the process of settling in Lisbon, the risks and vulnerabilities, and the main challenges faced when accessing welfare services from public and semi-public actors. The results show that despite Portugal having policies and exceptional interventions that would otherwise promote the well-being of immigrants, immigrants continue to face immense difficulties in entry and when settling. The difficulties in accessing documentation and neo-liberal policies of the state are the major obstacles to the well-being of immigrants in Portugal, as they not only perpetuate reduced social benefits but also proliferate social exclusion. There is a need for a more open and frank discussion on social immigration policies with a firm focus on social interventions, policy frameworks, and implementation to address the relentless challenges of immigrant social protection, is important.

**Keywords:** Immigrants; Social Welfare; Safety; Social protection.

#### Resumo

Este artigo tem como objetivo revelar as experiências dos imigrantes que vivem em Lisboa e examinar a forma como o sistema de segurança social português apoia as necessidades de bem-estar dos imigrantes. Portugal opera um sistema de segurança social misto, em que o Estado financia redes semi-formais e informais que operam a nível macro, meso e micro e que se combinam para responder aos desafios dos imigrantes. Este é um estudo qualitativo aprofundado, que se centrou em oito imigrantes anglófonos que utilizam os serviços de assistência social em duas organizações não governamentais em Lisboa. Quisemos conhecer o processo de instalação em Lisboa, os riscos e vulnerabilidades e os principais desafios enfrentados no acesso aos serviços de bem-estar de atores públicos e semi-públicos. Os resultados mostram que, apesar de Portugal ter políticas e intervenções excecionais que promoveriam o bem-estar dos imigrantes, estes continuam a enfrentar imensas dificuldades à entrada e à instalação. As dificuldades de acesso à documentação e as políticas neoliberais do Estado são os maiores obstáculos ao bem-estar dos imigrantes em Portugal, pois não só perpetuam a redução dos benefícios sociais, como também proliferam a exclusão social. É necessário um debate mais aberto e franco sobre as políticas sociais de imigração, com um enfoque firme nas intervenções sociais, nos quadros políticos e na implementação, a fim de enfrentar os desafios implacáveis da proteção social dos imigrantes.

**Palavras-chave:** Imigrantes; Estado social; Segurança; Proteção social.

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## Introduction

An immigrant is a person who moves into a country other than that of his or her nationality or usual residence so that the country of destination effectively becomes his or her new country of usual residence (IOM, 2019, p. 103). This is irrespective of the causes or motivations for movement and of legal status in the country of residence (Góis et al., 2019, p. 13). These are foreign-born or whose parents are foreign-born or who have foreign citizenship (Fonseca, Caldeira & Esteves, 2002, p. 136).

Traditionally, Portugal was an emigrant country, but in the last 20 years, this reality has changed, eventually becoming an immigrant country. Between 1960 and 1973, Portugal faced massive emigration, especially to other European countries which left a huge economic gap (Sardinha, 2009). Following the toppling of the dictatorial regime in 1974 and the subsequent decolonisation, there was an increased inflow of nationals who had been occupying the colonies, and Africans were regarded as “refugees” or “returnees” (Sardinha, 2009). It is noted that this moment facilitated the influx of more immigrant groups into Portugal (ibid). In the next decades, Portugal continued to have a limited foreign population, that were mainly from its African colonies of Cape Verde, Angola, Madagascar, and Guinea-Bissau, and eastern European countries such as Ukraine and Moldova (Costa Cabral, 2020). Most recently, a flock of immigrants from South America, Asia, Eastern Europe, and the former African colonies has steadily intensified (Costa Cabral, 2020; Góis et al., 2019). Similarly, the country continues to receive immigrants who are neither from non-Western countries nor non-Portuguese speaking countries such as China, the Democratic Republic of Congo, Gambia, Nigeria, India, Egypt, Nepal, Bangladesh, and others (Oliveira, 2021; Góis et al., 2019).

Sardinha (2009) attributed this to the: ease of access in Portugal, overstay by immigrants arriving on tourist visas, the colonial, religious, and cultural links to some sending countries, and the strong economic growth coupled with labour shortages in certain temporary and ‘undesirable’ jobs such as civil construction work, tourism, and intensive agriculture. In 2020, Portugal was inhabited by 662,095 foreigners with valid residence permits, representing 6.4% of the country's total residents, a significant increase from 590,348 in 2019 (SEF, 2020). Lisbon continues to accommodate a huge number of foreign residents, comprising 43.1% of the total foreign population (Oliveira, 2021 p. 45-47).

## **I. Theoretical framework**

Portuguese welfare comprises state and non-state actor interventions that are geared towards improving the lives of the people in the country, immigrants inclusive (Costa Cabral, 2020). The state offers policy direction and funding to some third-party organisations that provide direct services to vulnerable groups. Third-party organisations, community-based support associations, and informal groups are responsible for executing social interventions for immigrants through dispensing direct services such as facilitating the acquisition of shelter, food, education, health, employment, skills, and others.

Esping-Andersen (1990) asserted that Southern European countries operate a conservative corporatist welfare regime that is largely based on the church and traditional family hood, while other researchers such as Bonoli (1997), Ferrera (1996) and Leibfreid (1993) contend that southern European model is "rudimentary" in nature; characterised by fragmented systems of welfare provision. Ferreira (1996, p. 29-30) called it the 'Southern Model' that involves: (1) the peculiar 'excesses' in income maintenance (peaks of generosity accompanied by vast gaps of protection); (2) the departure from institutional corporatism in the field of health care and the (partial) establishment of national health services, based on universalistic principles; (3) the low degree of state penetration of the welfare sphere, in a broad sense, and the peculiar mix between public and non-public actors and institutions; and (4) the persistence of clientelism and the formation, in some cases of fairly elaborate 'patronage systems' for the selective distribution of cash subsidies.

The uniqueness of the Southern European countries can be attributed to many factors such as the weakness of state institutions, the existence of hegemonic parties and actors such as the strong catholic church, long spells of political authoritarianism, uneven modernization processes, and huge disparities in educational policies (Calado, Capucha & Estêvão, 2019; Ferreira, 1996).

In this undefined model of welfare clearly, the non-state actors have an important role. Accessing state welfare services has remained challenging for immigrants, refugees, and asylum seekers across Europe, paving the way for non-state actors to intervene (Bilecen & Sienkiewicz, 2014). These appear to inform of private interventions provided by the family (extended and immediate), religious organizations, NGOs (local and international), and neighbourhood, friends, and village communities to support the poor and vulnerable members of the family to meet their basic needs, help them manage risks and

assist them towards building their human capital by acquiring skills (Mumtaz, 2021). There are four major sources of informal social protection: family (extended and immediate), religious and secular organizations (local and international), and neighbourhood, friends, and village communities (ibid.). Calado, Capucha, and Estêvão (2019) affirm that there's an overreliance on such groupings for social protection across Portugal. For instance, although in recent years the state has promoted some programs such as the social insertion income or continuous care, the management of these programs continues to be the responsibility of civil society organizations and migrant associations.

Awortwi (2018) postulates two categories of non-state actors of social protection; First, organizations with a legal identity, structure, and recognition, and are commonly described as "formal" or "semi-formal", namely NGOs, "not-for-profits," charities, religious organizations. These work independently or mutually with state bodies to deliver services to targeted beneficiaries far and beyond single communities on behalf of their funders, thereby possessing national or international coverage. In Portugal, the welfare provided by non-profit organizations is integrated into the national social security structure called Citizenship Social Protection System. The state regulates, finances, and monitors all these organisations that subscribe to this system. To obtain this support, the organisations must have a contract with the social security system, in an arrangement called Private Institutions of Social Solidarity (Instituições Particulares de Solidariedade Social [IPSS]). There are several outstanding formal organisations in Portugal offering social welfare services to various categories of immigrants and most of them subscribe to the IPSS arrangement.

The second category comprises those that work based on collective action, community, family, neighbourhoods, and traditional solidarity networks, but often lack legal identity or formal management/governance structures. They are small community-based organisations (CBOs) whose services are limited to the local community, and their welfare services cater to their registered members at the community level, although sometimes they extend support to destitute and other non-registered members. They derive funding from their initiatives such as charitable donations, members' contributions, and grants from benevolent individuals and organisations.

In Portugal, immigrants have historically formed and maintained informal solidarity networks that cushion individuals facing adversity by providing for their basic needs such as food, residence, and employment, and have further fostered cultural, social, and political inclusion through demand for social justice and equal rights (Góis et al., 2019,

48; Sardinha, 2009; Fonseca, Caldeira & Esteves, 2002, p. 139-141). By 2019, there existed 140 registered immigrant associations and 274 non-recognised immigrant associations that were known, and these belonged to Angolan, Guinean, Cape Verdean, Mozambican, Chinese, Eastern Europeans, and other immigrant groups (Góis et al., 2019, p. 48).

Regardless of whether state or non-state, all these entities are governed by European and national legislation. Portugal is one of the European countries that has co-opted several European Union's regulations on social protection and social security concerning immigrants, namely: The Treaty on the Functioning of the European Union (TFEU); The EU Charter of Fundamental Rights (CFR) and Regulation (EC) 883/2004 and Regulation (EC) 987/2009. Portugal has abolished discrimination on grounds of nationality (principle of equal treatment) and outlined measures to curtail discrimination about employment, remuneration, and other working conditions for non-national EU citizens living and working in the country.

However, it should be noted that non-state social protection actors especially traditional solidarity kinships and families are often incapable of sustaining guaranteed protection and security to individuals with complicated or expensive needs such as chronic illnesses and unemployment because of their limited capacity (Awortwi, 2018). Similarly, they reproduce unequal power relations and create or widen social inequalities (ibid.). This demonstrates their inability to tackle overwhelming poverty and vulnerability challenges which necessitates state intervention. In the current times, states such as Portugal are lessening spending on social protection and as well as introducing stringent measures for access to social benefits as a neoliberal agenda (Mauritti et al., 2020), and for which such an undertaking is insensitive to the poor conditions of immigrants.

## **2. Methodology**

This is exploratory research that was carried out in the context of a master's degree, Erasmus Mundus in Advanced Development in Social Work. It demonstrates immigrants' experiences while living in the city of Lisbon and how they perceive the Portuguese welfare system, i.e., how it responds to their needs and well-being. It is a case study on eight immigrants, who intends to reveal their voices and expectations towards existing welfare opportunities considering the interventions of the state and non-state actors.

The research adopts a phenomenological approach which involves data collection aimed at illustrating the fundamental dimensions of a phenomenon based on the inner essence, structure of participants' lived experiences, and pure consciousness (van Manen, 2016; Munhall, 2012). From participants' experiences, meaning is interpreted and constructed, incorporating hermeneutic phenomenological patterns (van Manen, 2016; Creswell & Poth, 2018, p. 77). This approach guides the researcher to discover how participants narrate and construct meanings concerning opportunities and challenges for immigrants living in Lisbon.

Qualitative research methodologies are adopted and applied in a systematic enquiry into human experiences, perceptions, motivations, intentions, and behaviours in natural settings (Creswell & Poth, 2018). They help to explore and study attitudes, behaviours, and experiences of specific social groups or individual people in detail, especially through intensive interviews and observation (Carey, 2013, p. 42).

The population of the study was immigrants belonging to informal networks and/or under the support of state and non-state entities. With the desire to discover, understand and gain insights into the participants' experiences, the sample was intentionally selected from which most can be learned (Patton, 2015). The criteria set for the sample were specifically associated with formal and informal structures. Participants are often heterogeneous; hence the sample size varies and therefore it is encouraged that a few respondents are recruited based on their experience (Creswell & Poth, 2018). The researcher used a purposive sampling method of the snowball technique to recruit participants.

Consequently, the research interviewed 8 immigrants associated with formal and informal structures that support immigrants in the Lisbon region. Semi-structured interviews were applied, meaning that the interviewer used a combination of planned and unplanned questions, with the latter allowing the researcher to probe based on the respondent's answers (Carey, 2016, p. 129). A combination of online and face-to-face interviews were conducted; 4 online and 4 face-to-face. The physical interviews took place informally in a naturalistic setting for immigrants. In this data collection, we used flexible semi-structured interview guides with mixed, more and less structured questions, without predetermined wording and order (Merriam and Tisdell, 2015, p. 110). The interviews were conducted between March and May 2022.

The study participants were selected based on their English-speaking abilities, ability to understand the topic under study, mixed gender, married or not, with children or not. The above technique enabled the acquisition of considerable and descriptive data on

the well-being of immigrants in different contexts. Invitations were sent by email to 10 non-state entities and 1 state entity to participate in the study. Of the 11, only 3 NGOs responded with 1 declining the invitation. In contrast, these organisations identified 8 immigrants. Of these immigrants who lived in Lisbon, 4 were of Asian origin (Afghanistan, Bangladesh, Lebanon, and Nepal), 3 of Latin American origin (only Brazil), and 1 of African origin (Angola).

The interview was recorded, and the data obtained was analysed thematically. In this, the researcher described the participants' experiences/views of the phenomenon under study to reduce bias, developed study statements, extended the statements into larger units (themes), described "what" the participants' personal experiences were, described "how" the experiences happen (ed), and wrote a composite description of the phenomenon (Creswell & Poth, 2018). In addition, categorial analysis, a process of organising information based on the research questions, was conducted as relevant data is organised and separated from irrelevant data (Bowen, 2009). The researcher verifies and confirms interpretations about the participants' lived experiences after analysis (Munhall, 2012), and indeed, the researcher sent the transcribed data to the participants for final verification.

Raw data were coded following three phases "open coding", "axial coding" and "theoretical coding" (Creswell & Poth, 2018). Using open coding, the researcher examined the interviews to determine the text's salient categories. A new saturation of the categories was performed until new information obtained could not provide more information about the category. The category database was revised to obtain codes that explain or relate to the phenomenon under study, a form of axial coding. These are related to the causes, the context, the intervening strategies, and the consequences of the strategies of the phenomenon, which in this case is the well-being of immigrants. Using theoretical/selective coding, the information from this coding process was then organized to generate theoretical underpinnings used to explain immigrants' well-being conditions amidst social interventions. From this process, three major dimensions of analysis were identified that will be the object of reflection: migrating and settling in Portugal; living in Portugal; vulnerability conditions; responsibilities of state and non-state actors of the actor.

## 2.1. Ethical consideration

A written consent form was formulated, and all the participants agreed to it after the contents were clearly and comprehensively explained to them (Mauldin, 2020, p. 76). This included explanations on the methods and purposes of the research including complex concepts in the study, the probable risks and benefits for them and the wider society, the confidentiality and anonymity of their identities and information they divulge, and what their participation in the research entails. The participants' consent to participate was voluntary, with the freedom to withdraw at any time of their wish.

## 3. Results

### 3.1 Settling in Portugal

The participants in this research revealed varied circumstances under which they were able to enter Portugal. One respondent's journey was funded by the NATO establishment, while the rest by personal finances. Two respondents of Brazilian and one of Lebanese origins used tourist and golden visas respectively, two others of Brazilian and Angolan origins moved in with their parents, and the final two of Bangladeshi and Nepalese origins migrated from other European countries given their residence permits were expiring.

Immigrants from Portuguese-speaking countries entered Portugal directly using visas while those of Asian origin transited from other European countries holding residence visas that were soon to expire. This phenomenon was captured by Sardinha (2009) and Oliveira (2021) who attested that Portugal is becoming more relaxed on immigrants' entry and subsequent stay regardless of documentation status.

The respondents stated two major reasons for coming to Portugal: economic and personal safety. They stated that the financial difficulties they experienced in their original countries pushed them to search for a better life as they hoped to obtain better jobs and economic opportunities. Some indicated that they sought personal safety from; political persecution, violence, and family/marriage troubles. The asylum seeker was being witch-hunted by the Taliban extremists that had captured power in Afghanistan.

My parents told me they sold everything to come here, the house, the car (...) because of the financial difficulties, because of the violence. The main reason was the money and the violence in Brazil, the economics at the time in my family was hard, so we came here to improve life (Migrant 1).

But settling in another country is a whole different experience, immigrants have to devise means of fulfilling their needs in the new environment. This can be challenging, especially in developed nations that heavily rely on systems and institutions. Based on that, participants were asked how they settled in. Besides their efforts (savings and internet), they revealed different forms of support structures: family/friends' support and support from the state and NGOs.

The family/friends network included relatives they had before entering Portugal, friendships formed upon entry, immigrant associations, and social media groups. They used them to obtain their personal needs and manoeuvre the complex Lisbon city. This was the most relied-on support structure. Example:

In the beginning, it wasn't easy to get a house...but I wrote in the Facebook group of Nepali people, and they got me. I also had my sister living in Lisbon but now she left, and now I live in her former house (Migrant 7).

The state and NGO support; for example, the asylum seeker obtained substantial support from the Portuguese government in the form of accommodation and monthly allowance. Additionally, one respondent happens to have received support from an immigrant NGO that she was linked to by a women's organisation that supported divorced women. Example:

When I came here, I went to UMAR (Union of Women Alternative and Response), I told them that I came here without anything, and I don't know anyone. My husband took my kids and I need the association to help me. They sent me to NGO-C where I met the social worker who helped me get food and the house (Migrant 6).

Respondents still obtained substantial support from their informal networks. The overreliance on informal structures reveals how the Portuguese welfare system is still fundamentally engrained in the family system and third-party organisations as stated before by Bonoli (1997).

Another finding shows that immigrants who spoke the Portuguese language found it easy to integrate into Portuguese society as they easily formed friendships and accessed public services. Irrefutably, language proficiency remains a crucial component of the integration and inclusion of immigrants into society (Oliveira, 2021, p. 374).

A respondent stated that

I am a Portuguese speaker and I think it was easier for me in Portugal. I had no friends; I didn't know anyone in Portugal before I moved... But when I

arrived here, I wasn't living alone, I would easily speak to my housemates. This was the first step for me to start increasing the number of my relations and contacts. And then in the university, I had the opportunity of meeting new people and starting other relationships (...) I met people on the street, in the forest, many different situations (Migrant 4).

The respondents revealed challenges they faced upon entry. They included difficulties in obtaining documentation because of bureaucracy and red tape, basic needs (accommodation, education, and health), unemployment, and poor working conditions.

Example:

I reach here from Hungary with my resident permit expiring, I live in the Lisbon region for one year, and I try to get a job, but I fail. My immigration interview was coming close, I needed to get a job, I shift to Lisbon City to look for jobs (...). I find the job, but no contract, they pay very little and yet I work every day including public holidays...I only rest on Sunday. My landlord doesn't give me a contract for the house too (Migrant 5).

Other challenges are related with the separation from family and psychological issues:

I communicate with my other family members in Afghanistan, but they are living in hiding, especially when the search for house to house started by the Taliban. They are escaping for their lives. This causes me depression... I'm waiting and expecting them to reunite with me here in Portugal (Migrant 1).

The difficulties in creating social networks, language problems, and coping with the new weather and the urban environment, are other notable challenges revealed by the respondents.

Besides the challenges, the Portuguese society presented some opportunities or positive aspects which immigrants would thrive on if utilised. They are personal safety; immense freedoms such as association, participation, creativity, identity and culture, expressions, enjoyment of leisure, freedom to demonstrate, and equal rights; and diversity in Lisbon, facilitating association, inclusion, and integration. Example:

This country gives you more comfort. People are good, friendly, and very helpful, life is good. It's safe. It's like completely they let you feel free to do what you want. That's why I love to stay here (...) like somehow you

know, in Arabic countries, the rights are always for the man. So they treat women like nothing, women don't have any rights (Migrant 6).

I was 9, and at school, everything was easy. My class was diverse. I think that one thing that helped is that my teacher from first to fourth level in Sintra was also African (...). So, I think that helped a lot because yeah, I guess my colleagues and my peers just looked at me like yeah, she looks like our teacher (Migrant 2).

Additionally, access to social welfare services such as social benefits and other opportunities was uncomplicated for documented immigrants. 3 respondents reported having received COVID-19 sick leave allowance, 3 had received family and child benefits including paternity leave, 2 had received guaranteed minimum resources, and lastly 1 were contributing to social security. Additionally, respondents stated that they easily accessed health services (public and private facilities) and obtained learning opportunities especially Portuguese language lessons. All these were on condition of documentation and meeting the social security criteria. The respondents further reported that immigrants easily obtained accommodation and jobs, and they would easily receive rental and work contracts if documented.

The above finding confirms the existence of opportunities and services for immigrants in Portugal, equally disclosed by Oliveira (2021). Though seemingly presented with such opportunities, respondents stated that they and many other immigrants were still struggling financially while living in Lisbon only 3 respondents felt financially comfortable then. That finding undermines the perceived impact of the opportunities on immigrants' welfare conditions.

### **3.2 Living in Portugal: conditions of vulnerabilities.**

The respondents perceived their social conditions as still vulnerable. They contended that immigrants continued to live in precarious conditions despite the efforts made by the Portuguese government, non-profits, and other actors to create a conducive milieu for them. Indeed, many continued to face the challenges they encountered upon entry. These are categorised as social exclusion, such as lack of documentation, deprivation, racism; education and learning challenges, and mental health challenges.

## A. Social exclusion

### (1) Lack of documentation proliferating further hardships.

The incredibly challenging situation to obtain documentation as and when required from the migration office was resoundingly emphasised by all the respondents. The difficulties stemmed from the bureaucratic and lengthy process of obtaining documentation from the immigration authorities. This predicament was described as “the source of all troubles” as it engendered the following:

Poor working conditions:

when I first came, I started working in a phone repair shop in September 2020. The first thing they told me was you must work 13 hours a day, six days a week, and for 500 euros a month. So, it was below the minimum wage, that's minimum wage is 700 (...) No holiday, no benefits. He won't pay any taxes. He won't give me any contract. I work there for almost eight, or nine months (...) Later, the employer said, «I cannot give all of you a contract». If you want the contract, you must pay me the tax money. The salary was 500 euros, he would pay the salary. And from that, he will cut 250 euros for the taxes. So, a person was working for 250 euros (Migrant 5).

Difficulties in accessing social services and accommodation:

I have studied engineering, at a lot of places I applied, and I got the interview, but since I don't have a (resident) card, they don't want to hire me. So, I'm working in shitty places right now (...) they all are saying you don't have a card; we cannot enter your name. For you to get a resident card from authorities, you need a contract (...) In accommodation they also don't give you a rental contract, so you don't have any legal rights. If anything happens in the house because you know the landlord says sorry you must go tomorrow (Migrant 6).

When asked about how they tried overcoming such maltreatment, respondents said that they tried reporting their perpetrators to authorities such as the police. Example: "At one point, I got so frustrated, I went to the authorities. They said we can't help you. You must file a lawsuit in the labour court with all your proof and everything, which would then take 2-3 years" (Migrant 5).

## **(2) Deprivation.**

Acute lack of basic needs caused by financial hardships was reverberating among respondents. For instance, the respondent lived in uncomfortable accommodation, stated that her family had struggled to obtain food and accommodation, respondents stated that they failed to obtain health and education services because they lacked adequate money, and lastly the respondent stated that he constantly borrowed from friends to satisfy his family needs, they argued that such kind of deprivation had consequences on their individual lives, for example, one developed stress and depression while 2 others think that it negatively affected their child growth and upbringing.

Example:

We borrow lots of money from relatives, friends, and the ones that are living here in Lisbon. In that case, we were financially not well supported, I was depressed because to feed a family with 2 kids that need milk pampers (...) you have lots of loans to pay (...) Monthly, we are receiving 900, but from that 900 we are kind of repaying our loans (Migrant 1).

## **(3) Microaggressions, prejudice, discrimination, and racism.**

The respondents strongly expressed concerns about microaggressions, prejudice, and discrimination targeted toward immigrants. The respondents expressed their appreciation for the wonderful laws and policies regarding their integration and inclusiveness but stated that actual inclusiveness was still beyond reach. Racial discrimination and xenophobia in schools and the inability of schools to tackle racism. Example:

At school, it was rough. It was very xenophobic. It's for the people that are non-white like Gypsies, Africans, and Indians. And I was the only black girl in the class (...) My teachers and my colleagues weren't helping (...) It affected me the time came I wanted to go out of school. I wanted to like, stop (Migrant 3).

Street prejudice and open ridicule (despised; called lazy, ignorant, and sex peddlers). Example:

I had three incidents while walking on the street and talking on the phone. The first one, I was on a public phone, I was calling my son in Brazil, and then a man listening to me came over, a very old man almost 80 years. And he started talking to me, you have a job? I said, yes. He said, oh, but I have a nice place with a lot of Brazilian women. And if you want to work with me, you can work with me, and I'm going to make a lot of money. And so

he invited me to be a prostitute in the middle of the street. I said I don't know if I get happy because I'm 45 years old. But he continued, he was aggressive (...) Second time, I was seven years in Lisbon, I was talking to somebody on the phone, another old man came and said, I have an apartment here. I feel so lonely. You don't want to live with me, I pay (Migrant 8).

Subtle attacks (institutional discrimination). Example:

The company I am working for has a more American structure and influence. So, let's say they care about transparency of processes and meritocracy, but even in this company, I find a lot of limitations for people that are not Portuguese (...) they have this rule, they cannot surpass the 100% culture of the country. Most of the highest positions are for Portuguese and very few opportunities for foreigners (Migrant 4).

Forbearance. Example:

I feel more secure but not because they really changed, but now I don't care. If they prejudge me, I don't care. 90% of my friends are Africans and foreigners. I think there are good people here, but there are a lot of prejudiced people. They have a different scale of treating people, if you're black you are discriminated against, if you're English, they treat you very well, the white English, not Black English. It has a scale of treatment, good and bad (Migrant 8).

## **B. Education and learning challenges.**

Respondents stated that they had experienced challenges while at school regarding the Portuguese grading system and the school curriculum that was deemed imperialistic. One respondent dropped out of a Public Administration degree program because she had received limited career support from her immigrant family. Example:

The university system is very Eurocentric. In social work it's about Europe only, they talk about older people and children. They don't talk about racism, xenophobia, gender violence, homosexual violence, sex workers. They don't talk about social projects for gay people. They don't teach about character and understanding of diversity (Migrant 3).

Lack of information hinders immigrants' access to opportunities. Example:

I had a job interview and the interviewer with whom I explained my work experience and educational path was like why didn't you apply for a

scholarship? It was the first time that I came to know of it. Honestly, my fellow people aren't aware such opportunities exist, like me it was the first time that I was confronted with the fact (Migrant 2).

Language barrier. The respondents of Asian background not being able to speak Portuguese language, said they experienced serious communication challenges. One couldn't go back to school because of language encumbrances.

### **C. Trauma and mental health challenges.**

A respondent revealed that he was left frustrated, traumatised, and descended into mental depression because of the; persecution of his relatives back home, purported maltreatment meted onto him and his family by state authorities, and the limited support received from both state and non-state agencies. Appallingly, he wasn't offered psycho-social help. Example:

Look after 15 days of arriving in Lisbon, the state forcefully shifted us to São João da Madeira (...) we wanted to be in Lisbon to socialise with Afghans because they are many here. We spent there for 2 months feeling isolated (...) Look, we have other personal and family challenges like we don't have enough money (...) the Taliban are persecuting my relatives back home. Too much stress and depression (Migrant 1).

According to Act n.º 113/2021, Portugal has a deficit in mental health services which translates into inefficiency in dealing with these trauma and mental health cases in its population.

### **3.3. Responsibilities of welfare actors**

One of the research's major objectives was to find out the responsibilities and roles of the state and non-state actors (NGOs and social networks/families) in providing social welfare to immigrants.

#### **A. State interventions through the provision of social security benefits**

In the cases of health services and education, the respondents indicated that the state was a key player. Additionally, the state provided social security benefits to not only immigrants but to the entire population: child and family benefits, paid paternity leave, COVID-19 social security allowance, guaranteed minimum resources, unemployment benefits, and food, accommodation, and living allowance to the needy from state apparatus. Example:

We requested some money for the baby during pregnancy and after the baby was born, and we received it. I also had paid leave from work. The Father has some days off and the mother of course has a longer period. In January, I tested COVID-19 positive, and I applied for sick leave benefits. It's pretty good, they paid 100% of their salary. It's 66% If I'm not wrong from social security and 33% from the company you're working for (Migrant 4).

Immigrants accessed these social benefits not as special benefits for them, but as universal social protection benefits in Portugal.

The participants stated that they mostly used public health facilities compared to private health facilities. However, it was found that if it wasn't for the unrestricted access to health services for all those who tested COVID-19 positive, respondents wouldn't have used public health facilities because they lacked documentation or relied on private arrangements. Example: "I think, the Portuguese health system is great. And I feel that it isn't expensive (...) It's a universal health system. So, everybody has access to it" (Migrant 2).

In the case of education, respondents revealed having acquired skills in state institutions, with 2 spending all their education life in Portugal including university education as the other 2 were university students in public institutions at the time. Critically to be noted, these were Portuguese speakers who found it easy to join learning institutions. But they paid for their educational expenses in public schools (university fees).

### **B. Interventions by semi-formal structures**

The respondents acknowledged and identified the major roles played by NGOs, with many having received concrete services then, as indicated below. They provide direct services such as language lessons, link immigrants to jobs and support them access documentation, provide mental and psychosocial support, and enable them to access social welfare benefits.

Provision of direct support. Example: "An NGO gives us 900 euros for food, clothes, everything. That 900 is not individual. We are 6 people and so €150 individually per month. They also gave us a house, where we stay in Lisbon region" (Migrant 1).

Language lessons. 1 respondent was undertaking language lessons from the NGOs at the time of data collection, while a second one had completed the lessons.

Linking immigrants to jobs and support for documentation. Example: “The social worker of NGO-B helped me to do a CV, to apply for a job in a company, and to talk with the lawyer for documentation” (Migrant 6).

Provision of mental and psychosocial support. Example:

When I arrived here, my life was complicated, and I didn’t know how to start. I was having trouble with my husband. I needed some people to help me to know everything, how to live, what to do here and the social worker of NGO-B was very helpful. She's the best person I ever met here in Portugal (Migrant 6).

Enabled access to social welfare benefits from other entities. Example: When I went to NGO, they applied for me to Santa Casa (Church-based NGO) and Juntas (Local authority). They gave me food, a box of oil, beans, milk, tuna, and rice to eat and they paid for my rent. And just I bring the rest like beef or chicken (Migrant 6).

### **C. Networks and families**

Participants revealed the critical role played by their families/relatives, immigrant associations, and friendships they had accumulated over time. The major support was informed of.

- a. Solidarity, for example: We have a Nepali community here (...) sometimes I see they support people with food, and when someone dies, they contribute money to take the body to Nepal (Migrant 7).
- b. Social bonding, for example: Sometimes when I am very homesick, I go to the carnival, Brazilian Carnival. The population of Brazilians in Lisbon is big that they have the Carnival on the street with music. So, it is about our culture and the people getting more integrated (Migrant 8).
- c. Sense of belongingness and togetherness, for example: When I was experiencing xenophobia at school, my friends outside of the school would support me. They would talk to me. They gave me emotional support. We were groups of fellow Brazilians including students (Migrant 3).
- d. Collective defence of their rights as distinct people, example: Some movements in Portugal have a lot of people that I know, like, we go to associations and then we talk about subjects like transgender, and gay (...) because I have a lot of friends that are transexual (Migrant 3).

These findings further augment the earlier discussions on the significant role of semi-formal and informal structures in strengthening the Portuguese welfare system.

### **3.4 Main challenges facing public and semi-public actors.**

Respondents were asked to identify potential gaps and challenges surrounding welfare services provided by the state and non-state structures.

**A. On the state**, it was being affected by bureaucracy and red tape. According to the respondents, this appears to inform of slow processes, long waiting hours, long queues, less attention to social service seekers, and unexplained delays at the immigration support centers.

This was exacerbated by poor communication and information flow by those institutions and was believed to be caused by general congestion. Institutions like High Commission for Migrations and National Immigration Integration Support Centre in Portugal took a long to respond to calls and emails, merely seeking an appointment was challenging, and providing feedback to service users took long periods. Respondents revealed that it was a general problem and that even it occurred in health facilities and social security service centers. Example:

The immigration process is very slow. I gave my fingerprint on the August of 2021, it's 7-8 months now they still haven't sent me my card. They have a law that is 90 working days before you receive feedback. But they haven't replied, and they don't pick up phone calls. They don't answer emails (Migrant 5).

Other challenges included: inadequate social support, purported mistreatment of immigrants, and inconsistencies in some domestic laws and social policies.

Inadequate social support:

The social support provided to them was insufficient to sustain their welfare given that the cost of living in Lisbon was high and rising. Example: “In terms of the money for family benefits, it's a shame. 50 Euros, what can I do with 50 Euros in a month (...) they don't calculate based on the economy (Migrant 4).

Purported mistreatment of immigrants:

The respondents were appalled by the way immigrants were treated by some officials in the immigration support centers, especially ACM, SEF, and CNAIM. They

indicated that some workers in those institutions were irresponsible, negligent, and harsh to them. They never listened to their views as decisions were arbitrary.

After 15 days of arriving in Lisbon, ACM forcefully shifted us to São João da Madeira. We wanted to be in Lisbon to socialise with Afghans given they are many here. They threatened to stop food, money, and accommodation if we didn't go (Migrant 1).

ACM break their promises, they have only paid us for 2 months, and they don't listen or talk to you (...) We sent 10 or 12 emails and made lots of calls, but no response, they made promises, but they never fulfilled (...) I told them last time they are behaving badly, that's not the way that you should treat people (Migrant 1).

#### Inconsistencies in some domestic laws and social policies

The respondents stated that insensitive Portuguese domestic laws created differential treatment between foreigners and nationals. Some laws were either unclear which affected their implementation, or the duty bearers failed to implement them as mandated. Obtaining the residence permit was conditioned on the working contract and yet employers required documentation to issue work contracts. They also noted that the nationality law was ambiguous regarding the rights of adopted children. Lastly, the professional licencing law for psychologists that required practitioners to have studied in Portugal to qualify for practice caused a massive exodus of Brazilian psychologists. Example:

When I finished my studies, it was very complicated, I wanted work. But to have a contract I needed to show my legal documents. And again, to get documentation I need to show a contract. It was like a game. It affected me; I took a long to get a job (Migrant 4).

**B. On the semi-formal actors**, the major challenge was the lack of visibility among their target population. Example: "NGOs are scarce, and they are not reachable. You don't know where to find them even when you want to write to them" (Migrant 4).

Other notable challenges included limited social support, social stress absorbers, subjected to government bureaucracy, financial challenges, and limited-service user involvement.

Limited social support. Example: "We are receiving 900 Euros from NGO-A for six people, each 150 euros a month (...) and for the last three months you have to pay back the loans you got from friends" (Migrant 1).

Social stress absorbers. Example:

The government escapes facing a lot of anger from people (...) NGOs make government escape facing a lot of anger from people (...). They are always in stress from the people's needs (...). And I don't think it's Portuguese control, it's European politics because the money is from the EU (Migrant 8).

Subjected to government bureaucracy. NGOs faced the wrath of government bureaucracy and were left with an unclear financing mechanism and yet with a lot of work which is likely a means for sustained government control over their operations, according to one respondent.

Financial challenges. Example: "NGOs have a lot of work but with very limited capacities. They get EU money, it's a lot of money but only for like three years. They keep applying for money time and again, it's very stressful" (Migrant 8).

Limited-service user involvement. Example: "NGO-A gave us accommodation, it's in the basement, the night is dark, the day is also dark. It's not a comfortable living place, very difficult to spend life there" (Migrant 1).

**C. Regarding networks and family support**, respondents revealed major challenges as lack of leadership and identity, less, and scattered membership, and limited capacity. Example:

I know the association for Guinean people; their coordinator told me they are just recruiting people to join the association. So how do you have almost 30 years of existence and you don't have people (...). And the principal of this association is a Portuguese woman. I think sometimes some positions should be occupied by people belonging to the tribe because they will understand more of the problem of this culture better than outside people (Migrant 3).

Concerning capacity, the limited resources and capacities curtailed the fulfilment of an individual's rights and needs. One respondent said that family pressure was undermining child independence because family members had preconceived notions about children's freedoms and choices.

#### 4. Discussions

From the data findings, we confirm that non-state entities play an outstanding contribution in the provision of some needs and rights of immigrant groups in Portugal. They provide basic needs (food, clothes, shelter), emotional needs (psychosocial support), and

integration needs (employment, language lessons). However, immigration is a complex phenomenon, and therefore non-state entities cannot fulfil all the rights of immigrants. The state emerges as the funder and policy maker/regulator of many non-profits' activities, therefore, having a considerable influence on their operations. Additionally, it offers particular social benefits such as the emergence of basic needs (food, shelter) and social security, whose accessibility is conditioned, regulated, and associated with lengthy bureaucratic procedures. Such bureaucracy has pervaded the operations of third-party organisations.

Immigrants face serious existential needs and challenges amidst situations of limited opportunities, therefore undermining their desire to live comfortably as it was their main reason for migrating to Portugal. The difficult circumstances of living undocumented and/or acquiring documentation, bureaucracy, and purported maltreatment meted onto immigrants in state immigrant support centers were emphatically stated by the participants. Unfortunately, government reports published by Oliveira (2021) and SEF (2020) on the immigration situation never reflected either of those critical issues. Instead, Oliveira statistically captures several other social welfare challenges.

The predicaments associated with lack of documentation reproduced and reinforced the intersectionality of this phenomenon, consequently creating multiple needs and challenges for immigrants simultaneously. Thompson (2012, p. 178) referred to that as multiple oppressions, where social constructs such as race, gender, class, language, and other structures interact to generate discrimination and oppression. Persons lacking documentation were: faced with difficulties in procuring jobs, vulnerable to labour exploitation, denied rental contracts, and vulnerable to exploitation by property owners, which resultantly perpetuated deprivation.

The conditions of obtaining documentation at immigration offices that were marred by unnecessary delays and purported maltreatment undermined social justice. In the law jurisdiction, there's a legal maxim that states, "justice delayed is justice denied" which means any delayed redress or intervention is equivalent to none. Distributive and procedural aspects of social justice demand the construction and support of fair procedures and good governance, assurances of fair outcomes and results from actions, and provision of equal opportunities for all persons (Tyler et al., 1997), which all were being undermined. Wallis (2020) described how huge numbers of undocumented migrant workers in Portugal were 'falling through the cracks' during the COVID-19 period; unable to access social security, experiencing unemployment, and living in disadvantaged

conditions. This unjust treatment of immigrants produces perpetual social exclusion, which fails and violates the basis for human rights (Reichert, 2011, p. 189-190). OHCHR (2014, p. 50-53) obligates states to provide transparent, accountable, and participatory economic, social, and cultural rights to non-nationals/migrants whether documented or non-documented, for which this is being breached.

Having limited access to social benefits by immigrants isn't a phenomenon that has just been captured by this study, neither is it only in Portugal. Similar experiences were found across several European states (Lafleur & Vintila, 2020). This points to Portugal's neoliberal agenda of limiting access to social benefits (Mauritti et al., 2020), which inevitably is insensitive to the deprived conditions of immigrants. In this research, it is not surprising that respondents noted that immigrant NGOs operated under rigid frameworks such as contracts, timelines, regulated funds, and specific target beneficiaries, which affected the sustainability of interventions. In such circumstances, certain beneficiaries or services are often overlooked. No wonder, the reported exploitation of immigrants by employers and property owners received limited attention from the responsible agencies despite being raised as a concern by immigrants.

Neoliberalism is a force that is against the welfare state (Watts & Hodgson, 2019; Ife, 2016). It encourages the reduction of social security expenses, deteriorates general social security services due to continued dependence on the private sector, creates restrictive measures for access to social security benefits, forces professionals to do more and with fewer means, undermines the professionalism of the cadres leading to a reduction in morale, limits the activism, increases social inequality as the number of needy people increases, and many other bottlenecks (ibid.). It is recognised that neoliberal practice undermines the capacity of professions, and professionals to provide meaningful services to intended beneficiaries for instance by encouraging managers to exert control and demand compliance to managerial obligations such as emphasising resource accountability rather than fostering autonomous professional decision-making that contextually responds to user' needs (Dominelli, 2010, p. 55).

Immigrants are a complex and diverse transnational group who have immense needs (Lundy & Hilado, 2018). These entities mainly target immigrants and their physical needs, neglecting the complexities and experiences of individuals and their communities, especially when faced with hegemonic structures such as the state and society in general. Ife (2012, p. 230) states that it makes no sense to empower without understanding the nature and basis of power.

On the positive side, immigrants embrace Portugal's freedoms, security, and significantly, diversity, portraying it as an opportunity for inclusion. They were able to celebrate and interact with many other diverse groups which created a sense of comfort. Thompson (2012, p.13) states that diversity is a valuable characteristic that enriches the experience of social life, and such differences in ethnicity and identity should be seen as a source of learning, multiple strengths, stimulation, and interest, rather than discrimination. Diversity should be used to promote comprehensive interventions, such as multicultural experiences to promote integration, mutual coexistence, and mobilization of additional resources from immigrants and the public. Such practice underpins strengths-based methods of social work with immigrants (Thompson, 2012).

## **Conclusion**

Migration remains a big challenge globally as many more people are being displaced by wars, climate change, political and religious persecution, economic hardships, and other factors. The victims are forced to migrate in the worst conditions, often lacking social protection structures. Resultantly, they experience a range of psychological and psychosocial needs (Lundy & Hilado, 2018). Europe being one of the preferred destinations for many migrants, social protection for immigrants has remained a controversial aspect for several states, with some countries like Hungary, Italy, France, Denmark, and the UK opting to regulate the influx of immigrants through strict foreign immigration control policies.

Portugal is portrayed as a haven for immigrants, and even surveys on the attitudes and perceptions of Portuguese residents have revealed positive opinions regarding immigration, as immigrants are considered an opportunity rather than a burden (Oliveira, 2021, p. 24-25). This partly explains why the Portuguese government has more recently lessened the restrictions for immigrants' entry and stay in the country as more visas are being issued to persons from several countries (ibid., p.35-36). This is notwithstanding the widely appreciated policy frameworks of non-discrimination and universal treatment of immigrants regarding access to social welfare support. Precisely, Portugal is commendably pursuing a liberal foreign immigration policy, and subsequently in line with the international and European Union immigration policy recommendations that strongly encourage sovereign states to uphold the economic, social, and cultural rights of refugees, asylum seekers, and immigrants.

However, the study also confirms existing challenges for immigrants in Portugal, as many continue to languish in perilous conditions. If immigrants continue to live in such conditions in a liberal state, there's a likelihood that the whole idea of liberal immigration policies will be under scrutiny. This is already being witnessed continentally as there are debates about whether individual European nations should pursue liberal or strict foreign policies of immigration control. Most recently, countries like Denmark, France, and the UK have been criticised for pursuing strict immigration control policies.

Lastly, this exploratory research focused on the migration phenomenon of people from "Developing Countries" to Europe, and Portugal constitutes an interesting case. The study approaches the immigrants' integration into society as not only a legal right but also as a social right. This research deliberately discusses immigrants' welfare in Portugal from a broader perspective, highlighting many critical points that can be discussed further. Though the state remains the main source of social protection for immigrants in Portugal. Conclusively, given the qualitative research was based on a few semi-structured interviews and therefore its comprehensive coverage of immigrants' welfare conditions in Portugal may be skepticized.

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