

**Romantic Love and Intimacy Experiences: Discourses of Immigrant Women In
Portugal**

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Abstract

Based on a critical feminist framework, this paper describes qualitative research that aims to understand how immigration influences women's experiences of love and intimacy. Eight immigrant women with an average age of 32.25 years old were interviewed, and the subsequent data were analysed using a critical discourse analysis methodology. The results reveal how women's experiences of love and intimacy are marked by cultural standards informed by gender norms, and these lead to power imbalances in several aspects of their lives. Intimate relationships are particularly affected by social representations from the country of origin, with more conservative political systems predicting more conservative experiences of love and intimacy.

Keywords: women's immigration, love, gender, Portugal

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Over recent decades, academic attention on feminine migration has increased due to the growing prevalence of the phenomenon worldwide (Martin, 2014; International Organization for Migration - IOM, 2018). The Global World Migration Report of 2020 estimated, in 2019, that there were almost 272 million international migrants, equivalent to approximately 3.5% of the global population (IOM, 2020), with female migrants representing 48% of this total number.

According to the most recent report by the Foreigners and Borders Service (SEF, 2021), some 662.095 authorized foreign residents and citizens were living in Portugal in 2020, a 12.2% increase on the previous year. Of these, 325.972 were women and 336.123 were men, with the Brazilian community representing 27.8% of all these migrants (183.993).

Despite the significant numbers of women involved in the migratory process over recent decades, studies of migration have been characterized by an androcentric standpoint, further reinforcing women's invisibility (Oliveira & Gomes, 2018). In addition, up to the mid-1970s, the scientific literature focused on female immigration only within the scope of family migrations, thus devaluing women's autonomy and agency (Albuquerque, 2005). An interest in understanding female immigration therefore subsequently started through the analysis of family reunification, with feminist-oriented studies only gaining prominence over the 1970s and 1980s with a review of ethnic studies (Morokvasic, 1984).

By framing the migration process within a gender perspective, it was not only possible to point out singularities that underline women's and men's immigration experiences but also to outline the vulnerabilities faced by women in intimacy contexts,

such as in family and intimate relationships (Duarte & Oliveira, 2012; Silva, 2015). Despite this evidence disrupting the generalized idea that women migrate merely for family reunification (Oliveira, 2017), the research is still not sufficient to understand the ways in which gender influences, and/or is influenced by, the immigration process (Neves et al., 2016). Moreover, most countries still lack adequate data systems with information distinguishing gender, so migration might be more fully understood in terms of gender specificities (UN, 2019).

As many national and international studies have revealed, migration can reinforce the gender asymmetries and reproduce mechanisms of discrimination and oppression (Annoni, 2020; Cabecinhas, 2020; El-Abani et al., 2018; Gonçalves & Fonseca, 2020; Gonçalves & Matos, 2016; Marques & Góis, 2012; Silva, 2015), especially if integration policies are oriented exclusively towards accommodating the society of origin and satisfying the needs of the migratory purpose (Baganha et al., 2004). Also, the migratory process is often exploited to perpetrate multiple types of violence (Menjívar & Salcido, 2002; Silva et al., 2020) that may negatively affect migrant women's lives (European Network for Migrant Women, 2019).

The Organization for Economic Cooperation and Development has revealed that migrant women face more precarious labour conditions, occupy less qualified roles, and are more likely to be unemployed compared to the native population (OCDE/EU, 2018). In addition, they work more often than men in housework contexts, contributing further to their invisibility (ILO, 2016; Silva et al., 2018; Sousa, 2020). These circumstances may be partly attributed to the difficulties in achieving a regular status, as well as their *greater adaptability* to traditional female roles, such as domestic labour and family care.

Sexual exploitation and human trafficking are also a reality in many immigrant women's lives (Figueiredo et al., 2018). Such women may be recruited through false

promises of well-paid jobs abroad, with the exploiters then using different forms of abuse to intimidate their victims (EUROPOL, 2021).

According to Boyd and Grieco (2003), factors contributing to a woman's decision to immigrate can be classified according to individual, family, and social elements. Among the individual elements, age, ethnicity, rural/urban origin, marital status, reproductive status, economic status, education, and skills are the most influential. For the family, the dimension, structure, and composition of the household, as well as the family's stage of development and the class it belongs to, are important factors. Finally, social factors reflect the community norms and social values that determine if women can easily migrate or not and how they can do it.

In addition to these factors, non-economic reasons—such as the violation of sexual limits imposed by society, marital problems and physical violence, resistance to divorce, discrimination and lack of opportunities, and exposure to segregation—should also be considered (Asakura & Falcón, 2013; Bertoldo & Ricardo, 2017; Marchetti, 2018; Ventura, 2018).

While immigration may contribute to gender subordination, under certain conditions, it may produce walls of resistance to poverty and racism (Hondagneu-Sotelo, 2000; Oliveira & Gomes, 2018; Vergueiro, et al., 2019). Indeed, migration can lead to positive experiences for millions of women and their families, because the displacement to a new country may expose them to new ideals and social norms that promote their rights (UNFPA, 2006).

Gender, Love, and Intimate Relationships

Conceptions of love are extremely important in the organization of different cultures and societies, because they implicitly determine what is appropriate and desirable in relationships between individuals (Sternberg, 1998).

Sternberg (1998) viewed the phenomenon of love from a social constructionist viewpoint by saying that love should be contextually located, with its conceptions being cultural products that change according to social and historical changes, such that what is understood as intimacy or loving expression can vary depending on the space and time within which the phenomenon is located. Therefore, besides being a multidimensional concept, love is also a social discursive product (Neves, 2007).

In the gender representation, individuals internalize cultural discourses about what it means to be a woman or a man, and they are motivated or rewarded by taking on those roles in their daily lives. This historic-cultural legacy is also reflected in the ways people behave before entering intimate relationships, thus reflecting differences in expressions of intimacy and proximity between men and women (Moya et al., 2006). The socialization process thus determines the way that men and women behave and position themselves socially, and this influences the way in which notions of love are incorporated and manifested by each of the genders (Lelaurain et al., 2018).

By trying to analyse the stability and balance of loving relationships according to gender, some data seem to suggest that in the initial phases of relationships, men are the ones who are more likely to get involved in activities to preserve relationships by discussing and solving problems, while in the more advanced phases of relationships, women tend to put more time and effort into such activities (Malonda et al., 2017). From this, one could conclude that women seem to get more involved in extending intimate relationships, thus supporting the notion of conferring qualities like emotionality and care to the feminine gender in efforts to preserve family relationships and emotional ties (Giger et al., 2016).

The idea of romantic love has only spread in the West relatively recently, and in the majority of other cultures, this notion has never existed. In the 19th and early 20th

centuries, the idea of marriage as an institution was connected to a specific conception as far as the love and liberty of both genders was concerned (Giddens, 2001), one that highlighted the asymmetry between men and women and the absolute differentiation of roles.

It is with Giddens (2001) that this model transitioned from *romantic love* to a model of *confluent love*, with this being directly connected to changes felt in the social status of women. In *confluent love*, there is an egalitarian affective and emotional commitment between genders that accommodates a symmetric vision of gender and sexual intimacy.

As an alternative to the idea of *confluent love*, and in opposition to that of romantic love, Torres (2002) suggests a new model of love called *love-construction*, while Aboim (2006) speaks about the *love of interchange*.

The fragmentation of the ideals of romantic love has resulted in improvements in love relationships in terms of greater autonomy for women and an increased possibility of emancipation (Pinto et al., 2018). However, the myths of romantic love play an important role in legitimizing gender violence in intimate relationships (Baldry & Pagliaro, 2014), and the notion of love is still vulgarized, both by gender questions and cultural power practices that differentiate the positions of men and women (Carrascosa et al., 2019; Peters, 2008).

Love is therefore presented as an important cultural weight, and while research may have considered it a factor in well-being, some studies posit that love does not always have a healthy, versatile character (Giger et al., 2017).

Love is also an important factor in immigration, because the search for a partner outside the current borders trans-nationalizes intimacy through the migratory process. This form of immigration is a consequence of a globalized society in which new

communication and information technologies have played a crucial role in developing and maintaining loving relationships (D'Aoust, 2013; Girona, 2007).

Thus, the objective of this study is to characterize the life paths and development trajectories of immigrant women and understand how the immigration phenomenon influences experiences of love and intimacy by analysing the possible relations that may exist among gender, immigration, and love.

Method

This research applied a qualitative approach.

Participants

We recruited eight participants aged between 28 and 43 years old with an average age of 32.25 years old. Educational backgrounds varied between having no schooling at all and holding a bachelor's degree: More specifically, one participant had no schooling; four had a sixth-grade level of education, of which two had finished the sixth grade in Portugal as part of the Recognition, Validation and Certification of Competences within the New Opportunities initiative; two had a 12th-grade level of education; and one had a bachelor's degree. Most of the women were married, and one was living in a consensual union. Two of these women originated from Guinea, with the remaining having arrived from Cape Verde, Brazil, Colombia, Ukraine, Russia, and Angola.

Instruments

The data for this study were collected using a semi-structured interview protocol that allowed new questions to be introduced during the dialogues. The areas included in the script were as follows: a) Life History; b) Meaningful Moments; c) Challenges; d) Personal Ideology; and e) Life Theme.

Procedures

To accomplish the study's objective, several institutions were contacted that were directly engaged with immigrants, particularly institutions in the northern part of Portugal. Initial contact with the immigrant women was made by these institutions, and only after the women consented to participate in the research were their phone numbers given to us. Dates and times were then scheduled for interviews with the women, with all interviews taking place in the relevant institution, except for one that took place in the home of the interviewee. In addition, an informed consent statement was prepared that gave the title of the investigation and stated its objectives, with it also allowing participants to withdraw from the study at any time without prejudice and with guaranteed privacy and confidentiality. Ultimately, eight interviews, typically lasting for an hour and a half, were conducted by the primary author, with these being audio recorded and fully transcribed.

The interviews were analysed according to a discourse analysis methodology. Critical discourse analysis involves an in-depth study of the language used in an attempt to identify patterns. Such analysis deals with the way that language builds objects, and it can be used to comment on social processes that help maintain oppression structures connected to feminism (Nogueira, 2001). These interviews were transcribed in detail (i.e., all aspects of discourse were literally registered), and then the texts/material from the interviews were submitted to a careful, repeated reading and subjected to a categorization process. From the categories that were identified from the texts, we tried to establish relations that existed among the themes, experiences, and trajectories of immigrant women.

Results

For a better comprehension, the results will be introduced following the life progressions of these women—namely childhood, adolescence, adulthood, and old-age—which also follows the order of the interview script.

The familial and social origins of the interviewed women were characterized as coming from an underprivileged social and economic background, with the exceptions of the two Eastern European women. During their childhood, the women typically lived in precarious social and economic conditions with their families. Their families were large, with their parents working mainly in agriculture, except for the Eastern European women, whose parents had qualified jobs.

For some of these women, school was not greatly valued by parents, which is indicative of gender inequalities: “*At the time, my father used to say that a daughter did not need to study...*” (E5¹).

The principles of parenthood management were based on excessive severity with physical punishment and inflexible gender roles.

A great part of these women’s childhoods, except for three women, were characterized by domestic work: “*At the age of 8, I already knew to do everything a housewife today doesn’t even know how to do... I had to clean the house the way my mother wanted... I had to wash the dishes with those pots shining...I had to clean a house and cook as a woman*” (E6).

Adolescence was characterized by periods of instability and the desire to become an adult and gain independence. During this period, some of the women began their first experiences in the labour market, with these being characterized by precarious employment in household tasks and the hospitality industry.

¹ In order to preserve the identities of the participants, for each interview, the letter E is accompanied by an adopted number.

For four women, love in this phase served as disillusion and the cause of much suffering: “*When I fell in love... it was very hard, I cried a lot...*” (E7). For three women, love also appears to have been connected to their first sexual experiences with a boyfriend, resulting in unplanned pregnancies.

Religious rituals typical of their cultures were present, and they were imposed on some of the women from the moment they began to date, with virginity being seen as something sacred and pure. Becoming a mother in this period also blocked them from continuing their education.

The asymmetry in gender roles was also reflected in this phase of adolescence, and this did not contribute to the emancipation of these women. Although they worked and helped the family financially, socializing was controlled by older brothers, as was their choice of work.

The reports of these women revealed violent dynamics in their families, with the violence being exerted by fathers on mothers, mainly psychologically and physically. Violence was also present in the women’s peer groups and intimate relationships: “*He was very, very jealous, so much that he even wanted to get married and I said no and he hit me...*” (E4).

Adulthood was marked by the birth of children, marriage, and the migration experience, and this is characterized by the vulnerability experienced in violent and discriminatory situations. For two women, marriage was not experienced as a liberating experience, however, but rather as a new subjection to their husbands. This imposition was present at the beginning of marriages, so the vision of love was viewed as an oppressive institution.

Another important detail is that the women who worked and were financially independent left their jobs after marriage to take care of their children and the

household, except for one woman who never worked and two who continued to work after marriage.

Love in this phase was perceived as a daily routine, one in which taking care of the children was a responsibility for these women, and their intimate relationships were characterized as relationships where love forgives everything.

The discourses of these women about conceptions of love reveal a love based on comprehension, trust, respect, liberty, support, and passion. In practice, however, this is not what they ended up experiencing, and one of the women was even a victim of domestic violence.

The decision to migrate to Portugal was often due to factors such as war, illness in spouses, love, the strengthening of couples, and a desire to improve living conditions. Of all the women, only three had migrated autonomously, and one of them later became a victim of sex trafficking and was incorporated in a prostitution network in Portugal: *“They sent me the plane ticket. I had to pay for it later...When I arrived at the airport, my friend was crying a lot and I asked, ‘What happened?’. She cried, she cried...I asked: ‘Why are you crying?’ Then she explained that a friend of hers said she was going to work in a casino, but it wasn't a casino, it was a house of prostitution... men buy you drinks, you have to drink for the house to pay you and...”* (E7).

There are some noticeable similarities and discrepancies in the immigration stories of these women. According to the discourse, we can verify that discrimination and prejudice were felt more by the African and South American women: *“...sometimes I was walking on the street and saw a jersey on a shop window and wanted to ask the price, I was ashamed to open my mouth, so that they could not notice my accent, you know I felt insecure that they would think: ‘ah another prostitute that is here and another woman who came to steal another's husband’”* (E2).

In the professional context, all women, other than the Ukrainian woman, felt exploitation.

For three women, immigration was a source of new love relationships: Two got married in Portugal and another lives in a consensual union with a Portuguese man. Of these three women, one got married to escape the prostitution network she was in and is currently a victim of domestic violence:² *“It was there that I met my husband. That was also quite a bad experience because he tricked me. I thought he was good, he was a man who would help me, and he is the worst of my enemies. Today he threatens me with death...he deceived me”* (E7).

The discourses of these women show that immigration has had different impacts on their experiences of love. Marital separation was a factor that negatively influenced their love relationships, as feelings of distrust began to appear, and they no longer had their husbands' support. The different cultures of their countries also influenced their love relationships: *“It affected...We were separated a long time...because here one also notices a lot the matter of being young with old”* (E4). In other cases, immigration also allowed a bigger distance between the couple and thus allowed new marital relationships. However, there were women who said that immigration did not interfere with love.

The majority of women showed great difficulty in imagining themselves in the future, but they saw themselves as being better than what they are at the moment.

² During the interview a crisis intervention was made, and after the interview, this participant was referred to the domestic violence victim support office.

Discussion

This study helps to understand how the immigration phenomenon influences the experiences of love and intimacy for immigrant women in Portugal and how these experiences are framed by a gender perspective (Silva et al., 2020).

According to the life stories of the interviewed women, one could surmise that the socioeconomic conditions of their original contexts, as well as the poverty and instability there, led these women to feel a need to escape a situation that favoured inequality and discrimination (Bertoldo & Ricardo, 2017), but this did not happen.

The women who participated in the study showed different ways of experiencing love and the meaning attributed to gender. Indeed, there are discernible differences between the African, South American, and Eastern European women.

The socialization process was characterized by educational practices that promote gender inequalities and church values that are quite repressive regarding sexuality. The cultural context is also characterized by control over women, especially for the African and South American women, such that it was crucial for male roles to be enhanced over female roles. For the Eastern European women, these asymmetric models did not manifest in such a striking way, because they took on a more active attitude in their role as women.

The process of internalization, disappointment, suffering, control, and surveillance for love experiences that exist in the original cultures has impacted their experiences of love, with them associating the notion with suffering, tolerance, and subjection (Carrascosa et al., 2019). Their conceptions and myths about love are therefore typical of the culture they were raised in (Sternberg, 1998), and this represents a risk factor for the autonomy and identity of these women (Peters, 2008).

The idea of romantic love, a love that lasts forever, was present in all women. However, in the African and South American women, the asymmetries between men and women in terms of role differentiation was much more evident. For example, it was the women's automatic responsibility to take care of the children and the household. On the one hand, they take on the role and cultural construction about the male model as being universal and dominant, but on the other hand, due to some of them not working, the decision-making power and authority in the relationship is compromised, so the marriage is seen as something to preserve (Torres, 2002; Menjivar & Salcido, 2002).

Although the Eastern European women presented visions of romantic love, changes in their social status due to education in their original cultures revealed how these women already expressed attitudes in favour of equality, and many times they were the ones who made decisions, such as whether to migrate, thus getting closer to the model of confluent love (Giddens, 2001). However, the discourses speak of the experience of romantic love being one where power differences are quite noticeable in their intimacy.

Gender-based social relationships have established and defined representations about love and intimacy, and in the case of the African women, these are not easily deconstructed. Indeed, they appear to be an unavoidable barrier, as if the existence of a political, religious, and cultural model imposes different spaces for men and women, with men occupying the public space and women being pushed to the domestic or private space (Hondagneu-Sotelo, 2000; Sousa, 2020). The patriarchal model that exists in the culture of these women creates a culture of rights and entitlements based on sexual differences, such that power conceptions are uneven, and it does not allow for the emotional and egalitarian commitment between genders that is required for confluent love (Giddens, 2001). It is therefore essential for social discourses and practices in

terms of gender equality to emerge within intimacy spaces in order to allow a transition from the idea of “*romantic love*” to the reality of “*confluent love*”.

In many national and international studies, marriage has been found to be a deterrent factor for professional achievement for women following the birth of children (Marques & Góis, 2012; Silva, 2015). The assignment of household chores and the high sense of responsibility for caring for children led to some family imbalance and isolated situations for these women. Indeed, two of the women considered ending their relationships, thus confirming the idea of assigning to the female gender the responsibility for maintaining family ties while bearing in mind caregiving duties (Neves, 2007; Silva, Nogueira & Neves, 2018).

According to the discourses of some of the women, we can confirm that the conceptions of love that they mentioned were not experienced in practice, which leads us to the obscurities of these relationships and how one of the women became a victim of domestic violence (Duarte & Oliveira, 2012; Gonçalves & Matos, 2016; Menjivar & Salcido, 2002; Vergueiro et al., 2019).

For their immigration experiences, the women talked about the existence of gender discrimination, especially the South American women, but there was also cultural discrimination together with experiences of exploitation in work contexts, victimization, and racism, all of which are factors that inhibit inclusion within the host society (Figueiredo et al., 2018).

According to the discourses of these women, it seems that immigration can positively or negatively influence the way they experience love. For the African women, the marital separation after migration led to feelings of distrust manifesting in the relationship, and being confronted with a new culture prevented a more intense love being experienced due to the need to adjust. On the other hand, according to the Eastern

European and South American women, immigration brought one of the couples closer together and allowed new marital relationships, with one of them resulting from the use of recent information and communication technologies (D'Aoust, 2013; Girona, 2007).

Despite the goal to respect and protect the human rights of all women being included in the 2030 Agenda for Sustainable Development and the Global Compact for Migration, the evidence of this study revealed discrepancies that help us understand how the migration process and gender-based social relationships rooted in the historic and cultural context lead to vulnerability and weakness being experienced by women. Of course, any enhancer of inequality will not contribute to these women's liberty, emancipation, or independence. It is therefore urgent to raise women's awareness about their rights and potentials, as well as deconstruct discourses that position love as being "forever", so women can realise that they do not need to accept and preserve their predicament as an unavoidable condition.

The development of initiatives to raise awareness is therefore fundamental, but it is also equally urgent and essential to develop and implement interventions that are adapted for immigrant women. Thus, in accordance with the report on the impact of international migration that was presented to the United Nations Human Rights Council in 2019, it is necessary to adopt a gender-based perspective when analysing and managing international migration, so migration policies will also be sensitive to the particular needs of migrant women.

Having recognised the diversity and heterogeneity of these migrant women's experiences and paying special attention to their specific needs and vulnerabilities, it would be pertinent to continue investigating this theme. For example, future studies could take into account other factors, such as family type, nationality, age, marital status, and sexual orientation. This could then contribute to a more systematic and

detailed knowledge about migrant women's experiences of love, as well as issues of gender equality in Portugal.

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