Spaces of intersectional struggle: Migrant women's urban citizenship amidst COVID-19 in South Korea

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ABSTRACT

In this paper, I argue that intersectionality can benefit the study of migrant urban citizenship and that migrants' legal status affects their potential for urban citizenships. These arguments are based on life story interviews I conducted with Mongolian labour migrant women (both documented and undocumented) living and working in Seoul during the COVID-19 pandemic. Drawing from this data, I first discuss the mutual relationship between COVID-19 regulations and the specific urban spaces they affected, and second, how migrant women navigated this relationship. In practice, I categorise these pandemic-driven experiences into three specific types of spaces – spaces of *escape*, spaces of *fear*, and spaces of (potential) *discrimination* – which I analyse through the lenses of gender, class, and racialisation. In conclusion, I call for future research on migrant urban citizenship to critically consider the role of legal status in migrants' embodied processes of urban citizenship-making and investigate how underlying structural social and power relations shape these embodied processes. Reformulating the concept of urban citizenship in a way that explicitly informs policy making and fosters migrants' embodied experiences of urban citizenship is also needed.

1. Introduction

Migrant urban citizenship is a concept that examines the processes and policies shaping the mutual relationship between the city and the lived experiences, political actions, sense of belonging, and precariousness of its migrant residents (Brändle, 2020; Chacko & Price, 2021; Cohen & Margalit, 2015). The concept has evolved over the years, shifting its focus from calls for cosmopolitan citizenships and the formalisation of urban legal statuses to the analysis of the relations and processes influencing migrant residents' presence and contribution to and within host cities (Bauböck, 2003; Varsanyi, 2006). However, despite this constructive evolution, I argue that the concept still has room for growth. More specifically, I suggest that intersectionality (Bastia, 2011; Hopkins, 2017) can help urban scholars enrich their analyses of urban citizenships by looking past the urban-citizenship binary and by paying attention to the other structural conditions and power dynamics unfolding in the spaces of cities (Beebeejaun, 2017; Fenster & Misgav, 2015; Irazabal & Huerta, 2016). Additionally, I urge urban scholars not to minimise the barriers and struggles stemming from migrants' legal status - which I operationalise in terms of visa types – as it can greatly affect the legal freedoms, responsibilities, and daily lifestyles of migrants in cities.

Empirically, this article examines the mutual relationship between urban spaces and COVID-19 control measures in Seoul, South Korea, and how Mongolian labour migrant women (both documented and not) navigated the urban throughout the pandemic. Korea has received international attention for its arguably efficient social distancing and tracking measures during the COVID-19 pandemic (Cheshire, 2020; Oh et al., 2020; You, 2020) and this article also aims to address how these regulations affected its migrant population. So, I categorise how COVID-19 regulations have affected the urban, and vice versa, into three groups, namely spaces of *escape*, spaces of *fear*, and spaces of (potential) *discrimination*, thus emphasising the mutual and ambivalent relationship between specific regulations and the associated urban spaces. In sum, this article answers the following question: how have gender, class, and racialisation shaped the access of Mongolian migrant women to urban spaces in Seoul during the COVID-19 pandemic?

The paper is structured as follows. First, I provide a thorough review of the literature on migrant urban citizenship and juxtapose it with the one on intersectionality. In doing so, I illustrate how an intersectional approach is not only compatible with migrant urban citizenship, but it can also greatly benefit and enrich the study of the latter. In this

discussion, I also delve into what I mean by 'gender', 'class', and 'racialisation', and explain how focusing on these specific processes and power relations is useful in my interpretations. Then, I move onto the methods section of this article and briefly discuss the qualitative methodology and broader context of my research. Following on from that, I present and unpack my findings, which I organise into three subsections to illustrate the mutual and ambivalent relationship between urban spaces and COVID-19 regulations in Seoul. The article ends with a discussion about the advantages of incorporating an intersectional approach to the study of migrant urban citizenship, and of developing research that can constructively inform relevant policies at the city level.

2. Migrant urban citizenship and intersectionality

Urban citizenship is a concept that investigates and examines the processes and relations shaping the mutual relationship between the city and the lived experiences, political actions, sense of belonging, and precariousness of its residents (Chacko & Price, 2021; Nicholls & Uitermark, 2016). The city is viewed as more than "a geographical place or administrative entity, but [as] a specific sociopolitical and institutional setting, in which various scales— from the local to the transnational—are layered, condensed and materialized" (Blokland et al., 2015, p.655) and identities and relations encounter, develop, and clash through everyday spatial practices (Uitermark et al., 2005, p.625; Zacca Thomaz, 2022; Beauregard & Bounds, 2000, pp.248–249). Scholars have developed a diverse range of approaches to define the concept and the resulting experiences of and potentials for urban citizenship. Varsanyi (2006) has identified three main approaches to the study of the relationship between city and citizenship: normative; rescaling; and agency-centred.

First, the normative approaches challenge the primary role of the nation-state as the sole source of legitimacy of citizenship and tend to draw legitimacy from the international human rights regime (Varsanyi, 2006, pp.231–232). In these theorisations, cities are given centre stage for being the rooted, but not territorially bounded, context where cosmopolitan and transnational political identities can develop (Varsanyi, 2006, p.231; Beauregard & Bounds, 2000). Secondly, the rescaling approaches define urban citizenship "by membership and residence in the (global) city" (Varsanyi, 2006, p.232). Bauböck (2003) is the primary example of a rescaling approach to urban citizenship. With attention to "constitutional questions of municipal self-government from a democratic theory perceptive" (Bauböck, 2003, p.141), Baubock argues in favour of increasing city political autonomy vis-a-vis the state, and formalising local citizenship into an actual legal status (pp.141–142). The third and final approach identified by Varsanyi (2006) is the agency-centred, which views the city as "the physical place and context in which residents constitute the meaning and practice of citizenship" (Varsanyi, 2006, p.234). This process-driven approach "locates citizenship not merely in one's individual legal status or collective group identity, but rather sees it as a constantly changing relationship between residents and urban space" (Cohen & Margalit, 2015, p.668).

Now, I would like to address two aspects of the agency-centre and process-focused approach that need further development and explain how intersectional theory can fix them. First of all, while I agree that scholars need to continue investigating migrant urban citizenship as a contested process of negotiation on, through, and for urban spaces (Cohen & Margalit, 2015, pp.668–669) rather than as an issue of status, it is also paramount to critically examine the role that national migration policies and the resulting visa regulations play in the daily lives of migrant residents. In fact, political, socio-cultural, and economic mundane encounters, including political participation and forms of socio-cultural and economic contributions, are actively limited or rendered inaccessible to migrants because of their legal status (Chacko & Price, 2021; Gebhardt, 2016; Zacca Thomaz, 2022). As I explain in my findings, having a certain visa type or even naturalised Korean

citizenship greatly influenced not only the daily priorities and rationales of Mongolian migrant women during the pandemic, but also the ways and reasons why they visited urban spaces in the first place.

The second aspect that needs to be addressed is that the agency-centre and process-focused theorisation does not explicitly address wider political processes, power relations, and underlying social divisions beyond those originating from and within the city (Duplan & Cranston, 2023; Cohen & Margalit, 2015, p.675). The broader literature on citizenship has had to face similar critiques. Most notably, Yuval-Davis (2007) has urged scholars to view citizenship as an embodied - rather than abstract - category (see also Moreau, 2015; Ramtohul, 2015; Sultana, 2020), "involving concrete people who are differentially situated in terms of gender, class, ethnicity, sexuality, ability, state in the life cycle etc." (Yuval-Davis, 2007, p.562). On this note, applying a feminist lens to the study of the right to the city (Beebeejaun, 2017) can help explain, for example, how disenfranchised residents build political communities based on shared gendered, classed, and ethnic relations to fight for their housing rights (Fenster & Misgav, 2015) or inclusion in the planning process (Irazabal & Huerta, 2016).

In this paper, I implement an intersectional approach to investigate embodied multi-layered urban citizenships. Intersectionality is a concept that originated in the Black feminist movement of the 1960s and 1970s, and that was further developed by Black legal scholar, Kimberlé Crenshaw (1991), in the late 1980s to understand the co-constituting relationship between racism and sexism and how it affected the lived experiences of Black women in the US (Hopkins, 2017; Moreau, 2015). Since the 1990s, the concept has 'travelled' outside the US. Over time, the intersection of gender and racialisation has been studied in relation to other dynamic categories of identification and power relations, such as class, most notably, but also sexuality, age, nationality, and able-bodiedness. However, the aim of intersectionality is not to simply describe interconnected instances of inequality, but to examine the underlying structural power relations and processes resulting in diverse and at times, contradicting forms of oppression and privilege (Bastia, 2014). This focus on processes and relations is an important commonality that intersectionality shares with migrant urban citizenship, making the two theories compatible, both theoretically and methodologically.

Like urban citizenship, intersectionality has also evolved into diverse approaches, mainly the 'additive' and the 'co-constituting' (Anthias, 2012a; Yuval-Davis, 2007). Feminist scholars tend to frown upon the former because of its tendency of taking identities at face value, often treating them as unexamined, predetermined, static social categories. Conversely, the co-constitutive approach examines interconnected processes of structural and daily oppression and privilege (Anthias, 2012a, p.107). In this paper, I adopt a co-constituting approach; more on this in the paragraph below. Feminist geographers also argue that structures of oppression and privilege, and the resulting lived experiences, need to be understood as socially constructed within specific places (Mollett & Faria, 2018, p.570). According to Rodó-de-Zárate and Baylina (2018, p.549), "place is not only showing variability of intersectional relations but rather configuring them". In this sense, intersectionality and migrant urban citizenship share the same relational conceptualisation of space as the translocal locality (Anthias, 2008; Brickell & Datta., 2011) shaping the subjectivities, power relations, and structures experienced by migrants (Hill Collins & Bilge, 2016, p.146).

Now, I want to discuss which social relations I have observed in the field and examine in this paper, namely gender, class, and racialisation. Although I am about to define each of them separately, I will discuss them in relation to one another in the empirical section of the paper. As Yuval-Davis (2007) explains, "although each of these vectors has a separate ontological basis, in any concrete reality, the intersecting oppressions are mutually constituted by each other" (p.565). "Intersectionality research therefore places special emphasis on the simultaneity of oppression" (Simien, 2007, p.265) and contends that "no social group is homogenous" (p.267). It follows that even in the case of a

defined social group (e.g., Mongolian migrant women in Korea), a range of identities and power struggles exist in tandem (Bastia, 2014; Simien, 2007) resulting in various, complex forms of urban citizenships (Fenster & Misgav, 2015).

Now, let us move onto the definitions of the social relations discussed in this paper: gender, class, and racialisation. First, according to Anthias (2012a), "gender is about relational processes around particular types of social differentiation […] and social stratification, hierarchy and social division" (p.105), and not simply a parameter of difference to determine groups (e.g., women versus men). These processes, identities, and relations are "contradictory, reiterative and performative [...] made and remade in social relations in the workplace [and in the household]" (McDowell, 2008, p.497). Additionally, as Butler (1990) argues, gendered processes are always embedded and routinely produced through a dominant heterosexual matrix. This point is particularly important in the analysis of the case study represented in this article; heteronormativity rules the gendered relations in both Korean and Mongolian societies, with each group reproducing their own particular heteronormative norms and expectations (Kendall, 2002; Benwell, 2006).

Second, like gender, class too has often been reduced to a static category of identification, based on economic inequalities (Anthias, 2012b, p.122). This simplistic understanding of class ends up stripping the concept of its inherent relationality and dynamism (Anthias, 2012a, p. 104). In this article, I use the Bourdieusian approach which defines class as a relational social position legitimated by one's symbolic capital (e.g., recognition and consideration from others, based on the person's resources or lack thereof) (Anthias, 2012b, pp.122-123). In practice, I investigated how migrant women's financial, social, and cultural resources shape their relations with others in the host society, and how in turn, their access to said resources enables or prevents them from being treated with respect and consideration in urban spaces (Van Hear, 2014).

Third and finally, this paper also explores processes of racialisation. Racialisation can be understood as "a dialectical process, categorizing people into distinctive, biologically reproducible groups based on real or imaginary phenotypical differences" (Hough, 2022, p.617). According to Chung (2020), "in East Asia, where the concept of nationality is closely related to ethnic, racial, and national identity … contemporary manifestations of racism have been subtle with emphasis placed on cultural differences, national identity, and 'anti anti-racism' compared to atavistic forms of racism based on biological differences" (p.2511; see also Ang et al., 2022). For example, depending on whether a migrant's origin country is perceived as wealthy and developed or as poor and underdeveloped, the migrant will be treated accordingly (Hough, 2022; Raghuram, 2022). This is particularly important in the analysis of my case study, since Mongolian women can easily 'pass' as Koreans due to their similar physical and facial features (Choi & Kim, 2015; Kim & Jang, 2017). To recap, in this paper, I illustrate through an intersectional lens, for example, how and why respondents used their passing privilege: in public spaces, some of them actively resorted to 'tricks' to avoid disclosing any information (even just their names) for fear of being singled out as poor, unskilled migrant women escaping poverty from 'underdeveloped' Mongolia.

3. Methods and context

This article is based on data I collected during a six month-long fieldwork in the Seoul metropolitan area, during two trips between fall 2021 and spring 2022. By Seoul metropolitan area (hereafter, Seoul), I am referring to the administrative districts of Seoul Special City, Incheon Metropolitan City, and Gyeonggi-do. Most of my respondents were living outside the administrative boundaries of the capital because the neighbouring municipalities had more affordable rents. But they would still visit central Seoul for work or leisure. In general, allowing the geographical scope of the research to be relatively

vast turned out to benefit my findings, as I was able to find out how the particular features of urban spaces away from the hustle and bustle of the capital resulted in new ways migrant women viewed and used these spaces during the pandemic.

Moving on, for context, Korea is the country where most Mongolian nationals reside abroad (National Statistics Office of Mongolia, 2020, p.156). Migration rationales predominantly include economic incentives (e.g., higher salaries, a profitable currency exchange rate), but geographic proximity and popular cultural trends are also important factors (Choi & Kim, 2015). In short, Mongolians tend to view Korea as a land of (economic) opportunities, but also as a high-tech country with an attractive consumerist lifestyle not so attainable in Mongolia (Kim & Jang, 2017). Stemming from these real and imagined perks, it is common for migrants to share their salaries and useful information (i.e., economic and social remittances) with relatives back home as a strategy to maintain transnational relationships (Carling, 2020). However, during the pandemic, many of my informants struggled to engage in this practice: their packages filled with Korean goods had been stuck at the Chinese-Mongolian for months, due the border closure (Walker et al., 2020); talking on the phone with their relatives caused great distress, as they worried for the health and safety of their loved ones in Mongolia.

Methodologically, the research design of my project included qualitative methods such as life-story interviews (Plüss, 2018), in-depth interviews, and semi-structured interviews. Interviewees were recruited through snowball sampling with the help of my Mongolian interpreters. This article draws on the data that specifically focused on the respondents' perceptions and lived experiences of the COVID-19 pandemic in Seoul. In total, I collected 14 life story interviews with Mongolian marriage migrant women (holding a marriage visa F6, a long-term residency permit F5, or Korean citizenship); 11 life story interviews with Mongolian labour migrant women (holding student visas D2 and D4, temporary work visas E7 and E9, job seeking visa D10, or business visas D8 and D9); and four life story interviews with undocumented Mongolian migrant women. For this specific article, I examine the experiences of Mongolian labour migrant women, both documented and undocumented. All interviewees have been given a pseudonym to ensure anonymity (Laoire, 2007). Through this comparative focus on migrant women's visas, I am able to discuss how status too shapes the daily lived experiences of Mongolian women and their potential for pursuing and exercising their urban citizenship.

I used thematic data analysis to identify and examine patterns and key themes (Rosenthal & Fischer-Rosenthal, 2004) to analyse the interview transcripts. In order to conduct these interviews, I hired two interpreters who were Mongolian women in their late 20s and early 30s and had also studied and worked in Seoul. When vetting potential interpreters, it was essential that their positionality aligned with the migrant groups' as much as possible (Edwards, 2013). During each stage of the data collection phase, I could only communicate with my informants through my interpreters, due to the language barrier. I had to be critically mindful of how my positionality as a white, European woman might influence the interview process and analysis of findings (Carling et al., 2014, p.37). In my field diary, I regularly unpacked my preconceived ideas about gender, class, and racialisation in the UK or US, and reflected on how they differed in the Mongolian and Korean contexts. I also organised informal meetings with my interpreters to learn more about specific aspects of contemporary Mongolian and Korean societies, from contemporary racial discourses in Mongolia, to classed cultural trends in Korea, and Mongolian society's expectations of women.

4. Findings: how the pandemic changed Mongolian migrant women's access to urban spaces

In this section, I explain how the relationship between urban spaces and COVID-19 control measures in Seoul have shaped the ways Mongolian labour migrant women exercised their urban citizenship during

the pandemic ([Chacko & Price, 2021](); [Zacca Thomaz, 2022]()). I unpack my respondents' experiences of embodied urban citizenships through an intersectional approach that emphasises the role of gendered, classed, and racialisation relations in their access, use, and perceptions of Seoul's urban spaces during the pandemic. However, it is important to point out that not all three relations are simultaneously relevant at all times and in all spaces ([Hopkins, 2017]()): certain spaces can function as catalyst for specific gendered or classed or racialisation processes to happen or not ([Rodó-de-Zárate & Baylina, 2018]()). So, instead of providing an overview of all the COVID-19 control measures ever implemented in Seoul, I will discuss individual regulations in relation to the urban spaces that they affected the most, and explain which social relations characterised my respondents' embodied experience of urban citizenship.

Drawing from my interviews with Mongolian labour migrant women, I identified a) spaces of *escape*; b) spaces of *fear*; c) spaces of (potential) *discrimination*. The objective of this categorisation is to provide a digestible framework to understand my informants' diverse and complex experiences of urban citizenships during the pandemic. I organised these categories in line with my respondents' positive and/or negative perceptions of both the COVID-19 regulations and the urban spaces most affected by these specific measures. For each category, I compare and contrast the experiences of several Mongolian migrant women, to highlight how within the same spaces and under the same COVID-19 regulations, women with specific visa types and embodied structural differences experienced these spaces in different ways. Depending on their subjectivities, legal status, and the spaces they were in, some of my respondents also devised strategies to circumvent COVID-19 regulations. These mundane strategies included straightforward solutions such as limiting their urban mobility to reduce the risk of infection, but also more subtle 'tricks' like turning their phone's GPS off and using fake names when checking-into public spaces. I explain each of these strategies below, in relation to the specific spaces they were associated with.

a) Spaces of *escape*

'Spaces of escape' included urban peripheries, parks, and other public natural sites outside the city centre. These are urban spaces that my respondents viewed in a particularly favourably light because there, they could either 'bend' the rules without having to face the social and legal repercussions they would if they were in Seoul or enjoy a degree of spaciousness and comfort (e.g., greeneries, fresh air) that was unavailable anywhere else ([Larson et al., 2022]()). In general, rules such as having to wear a mask outside at all times ([Kim et al., 2022]()), and other hygienic guidelines, were positively received. In fact, most of my respondents openly praised the Korean government for its serious management of COVID-19 control measures. However, such positive perceptions need to be contextualised: these regulations were among the simplest to follow and the least problematic and as such, my respondents complied with them without any hard feelings. For example, Arban, a labour migrant employed by a Korean company, willingly followed these simple rules for fear of getting sick and infecting others. In addition, her job security also gave her a sense of safety and stability, in that she knew she would not get fired if required to self-isolate.

> "At the beginning of COVID, I always wore a mask because I was afraid that I would get infected when I went out, so I always disinfected my hands. And when [the pandemic] started, I was afraid that I would get sick. In addition, because I work a lot, if I got sick, other people would also be affected [infected], and the company's work will also stop. If I had gotten sick, though, I would have been fine, workwise. The company would not fire its employees or retract their contracts (or visas) if they had to self-isolate because of COVID."

However, in urban spaces such as urban peripheries, many felt that they could occasionally bend these rules - especially having to wear a

face mask at all times - without fearing of being judged and singled out by other residents, and of being labelled as 'problematic' migrants ([Sajjad, 2018]()). As Munkhzaya, a documented labour migrant, explains:

> "I did everything the government said. At some point, if I would feel out of breath because of the mask, I would take it off if I was close to home or in my neighbourhood. [But] if I went to Seoul, or if I was inside public transportation, then I would wear a mask and I would just [comply with] whatever the authorities were saying at the time."

Being away from the hustle and bustle of the capital, but also from its authorities, allowed Munkhzaya to occasionally bend the rules without having to face social or legal repercussions. This was possible due to the nature of the urban space she was living in - a less affluent urban periphery of Seoul with lower rent prices and quality of housing ([Kim et al., 2011]()), far less busy than the city centre. So, during the pandemic, the quiet and residential nature of these peripheries ensured that Munkhzaya would not have been confronted by other residents or commuters and be deemed 'rule breaking' migrant women from an 'underdeveloped' country. Stereotypes about migrants' behaviours in public spaces can have a significantly detrimental effect on the ways they are seen by the public, and thus, cause serious consequences in terms of labour opportunities, safety, and rights ([Duplan & Cranston, 2023](), p.337). However, other spaces of escape also included parks and natural sites. Like Munkhzaya, Gandalgor, a more affluent labour migrant with permanent resident status, believed that:

> "Korean people always follow the rules. I feel appreciative of living in Korea because of this mindset. At the beginning of the pandemic, we would receive two masks per person, each week; a curfew at 8PM was also introduced, and everybody respected it... Back then, I did not go anywhere, except for outdoor locations, like rivers and lakes. I could not bring the kids to cafes or parks; they would use lunchboxes instead of going to the restaurant. My priority was to keep them safe. Now [April 2022] that there is a gradual re-opening of public spaces, I am starting to go out again."

Unlike Munkhzaya, Gandalgor had the financial means and the time to visit other public sites (rivers, lakes, and so on) beyond the administrative boundaries of Seoul city where she and her family could be outside without having to fear infection or follow strict COVID-19 regulations. Her resources allowed Gandalgor to have access to multiple other spaces, unlike Munkhzaya, whose lack of resources entailed she could only occasionally and carefully bend the rules in her neighbourhood whilst still running the risk of being singled out as an undesirable and disrespectful migrant resident. However, it is also necessary to point out that not all women felt comfortable accessing public spaces, let alone bending the rules. Some respondents, like Dalan, felt incredibly overwhelmed throughout the pandemic, to a point where they significantly limited their daily mobility. Uncertain about the gravity and duration of the pandemic, Dalan's rationale arguably stemmed from her concern for her children's safety.

> "I started teaching when my children were 5 years old, and I started working for 6 years. I was doing this job until the coronavirus broke out, but after the coronavirus, I stayed at home [for two years]. I was following the government's work. I was worried because people were dying painfully. I thought everyone should follow suit and stay at home. I was afraid. I thought that if I went out and got sick, my children would get sick. People were dying because there was no treatment. So, I sat at home thinking that if I stay at home, the [pandemic] will end quickly."

By comparing Arban, Munkhzaya, Gandalgor, and Dalan's accounts through an intersectional lens, in terms of processes of gender, class and racialisation, it becomes evident how embodied urban citizenship depends not only on the relationship with urban spaces, but also on underlying power dynamics between migrants and their host societies. In practice, one way or another, all these migrant women followed rules

they deemed essential, but their motivations and strategies reflected their embodied relations as documented migrants (Arban knew that she could not be fired if she got infected despite wearing a face mask), residents (Munkhzaya and Galdalgor made the best out of their residential circumstances and bend the rules), and parents (Dalan and Gandalgor made decisions with their children's wellbeing in mind).

b) Spaces of *fear*

Whenever regulations were perceived positively but resulted in negative perceptions of the affected urban spaces, I categorised these sites as 'spaces of fear'. In terms of control measures, I am going to focus on the GPS-based track-and-trace system, and its influence on migrant women's views and access to busy commercial streets and public transportation. In general, my respondents viewed the tracing system as a necessity, especially at the beginning of the pandemic, when little was known about COVID-19. As Zolzaya, who has a business visa and runs her own private company, points out:

"I was afraid when there was no information [about COVID-19]. It was difficult when people couldn't see each other, couldn't talk, couldn't eat out, and then everyone else fell apart, and then Europe got back to normal. I thought it was just a cold, we were too scared. But the tracking was a must. When it was a terrible disease like it was in the beginning, tracking was a really important step, but now we know that the coronavirus is not so dangerous."

However, despite being deemed essential, the tracking regulation turned busy commercial streets as well as public transportation into sites of fear. In fact, most of my respondents became afraid of entering these sites for fear of infection, but also for fear of being notified to self-isolate for 14 days (Cheshire, 2020; Ryan, 2020). Mandatory self-isolation was particularly concerning for Mongolian migrant women whose livelihood and visas depended on their ability to work to sustain their family. Altan, a graduate student with a work permit, explains that life continued as normal during the pandemic, and that she was only worried about her family and her close contacts getting sick and not being able to work.

"If I couldn't work, then everyone [partner, colleagues] would have to be isolated at home for 14 days, and that would have been hard to stand. I was also worried about not getting paid if I didn't work because I had gotten COVID."

Conversely, in the case of Myagmar, who was employed by a Korean business owner, her life did not continue as normal, as the risk of infection worried her considerably more. She knew that if she had been told to self-isolate for two weeks, the shop she was working at would also have to stay closed for 14 days. To avoid this risk and her employer's explosive response to the potential shop's closure, she decided to turn off her phone's GPS, so that she would not be tracked, and thus, receive a quarantine notification (Ryan, 2020). She explains:

"I turned off the location on my phone to avoid getting the COVID-contact notification. If the shop had to close the owner will be angry. Our director is very stressful. He screams unimaginably. But if you change the workplace because of your employer, you won't get to keep your work visa... He treats me like that because he knows he can get away with it. If I was married to a Korean man, he wouldn't be able to treat me like that."

It can be argued that the power relation between the documented migrant women and their employee also influenced whether my respondents were afraid of accessing public spaces during the pandemic, either because they were worried of being fired or not getting paid. But in the case of Bolormaa, her undocumented status entailed that she did not have a Korean phone number that could be tracked. She explains that since the phone contract was under her employer's name, and because he said he would not fire anyone for getting sick, she did not experience the same degree of worry as Altan or Myagmar.

"I don't go out much by nature, so that my routine didn't change much during the pandemic. When I was not at work, I was at home resting. I was not afraid of COVID because the phone number was in my boss's name. Plus, the boss said that if anyone caught COVID, he would let you keep working, so I was not afraid to live as usual."

Drawing from Zolzaya, Altan, Myagmar, and Bolormaa's accounts, it is evident how legal status mattered in how migrant women exercised their urban citizenships during the pandemic. Zolzaya complied with the track-and-trace system but being self-employed and running her own private business meant she did not fear being fired due to mandatory self-isolation. Altan knew that she would not lose her student visa even if she had gotten COVD-19; her family's safety and the financial burden of self-isolation were her primary concerns, but her presence within urban spaces did not change in any remarkable way. Conversely, Myagmar's subordinate relationship to her Korean employer made her extremely vulnerable to her sponsor's abuse and threats. Additionally, being a single mother in need of work and a migrant woman relying on his sponsorship enabled her employer to perpetrate abusive threats. It follows that, as a result of this uneven power relation stemming from her visa status, Myagmar also felt pressured to turn her phone's GPS off whenever she would visit busy commercial streets near her workplace and thus, put herself and others at risk of infection. Counterintuitively, Bolormaa, despite being undocumented, enjoyed far more support and understanding from her employer than Myagmar. Yet, her status also technically exempted her (she did not have a phone contract) from following the rules, thus putting herself and others at risk.

c) Spaces of (potential) *discrimination*

I categorised cafes and restaurants as 'spaces of (potential) discrimination'. These were spaces that respondents saw as sites of relaxation, socialising, and networking, but also of status and conformity (Song, 2014). Overall, they carried positive connotations among Mongolian women who pursued a higher classed position and wanted to fit into Korean standards of wealth and prestige. But during the pandemic, checking into these spaces became mandatory and customers were required to share their personal details either by writing their contact information on a sheet provided by the business (i.e., the 'manual' check-in), or through a QR code automatically generated by apps such as KAKAO and Naver (respectively, Korea's alternatives for WhatsApp and Google) (MOWH, n.d.; Expat Guide Korea, 2020). The 'manual' check-in introduced new stressors for some of my respondents as revealing their personal information also meant exposing their foreignness, resulting in micro-aggressions. Enkhtuya, who is an office worker at a Korean company, explains it best:

"Before the QR code was introduced, we had to write our name and contact information on a piece of paper. I used to find it awkward to write my name and personal information in Mongolian, but with English letters. So, I preferred to write fake Korean names, followed by my own phone number. I feel more comfortable using the QR code... I didn't want to declare that I am a foreigner. During brief interactions with Koreans, I also don't say my Mongolian name; with longer interactions and relations at work or that happen often, I do share my name. By not saying my name, I don't have to share my life story to curious Koreans and can keep personal and intimate information private."

By writing a fake name, Enkhtuya was able to hide herself in the crowd and access leisure urban spaces without being discriminated as a 'poor foreigner woman'. This form of subtle racialisation - that is, in the form of intrusive questions and essentialised assumptions - was incredibly common among all of my respondents, and it is among all migrant women in general (Hough, 2022). In Enkhtuya's opinion, "[Koreans] are very proud of the 'development' label that Korea comes with now, and that other Asian countries do not have. I respect their opinions, but do

not agree with their attitude of superiority." Usually, these attitudes assume that if a foreign woman from a poorer country has moved to Korea, then she must have done so to escape poverty, and is even likely to be pursuing romantic relationships with Korean men in exchange for a marriage visa. Other respondents have pointed out how frequent and mundane these attitudes can be. Despite being rooted in both a sense of curiosity and social hierarchies, Tuya and Naraa, respectively, share how uncomfortable these interactions can feel, but that language skills can also help overcome them.

"In Korea, I have met a lot of people who have this kind of mentality. I heard a lot of questions like *how much does your husband earn per month? How much money does he send to Mongolia*? *Is it nice to live in Korea?* Of course, it feels uncomfortable. It is very rude to ask about personal things like age or salary."

"When there is such an attitude, I speak directly and honestly, and because I have good Korean language skills, such problems [being criticised or judged for being a foreigner] occur less. When there was such a problem or attitude, I would confront it directly. People would ask, out of curiosity, *where did you come from?* But it is uncomfortable to be asked if you are Mongolian."

Indeed, Enkhtuya's strategy to anonymise herself was in direct response to mundane processes of othering that were further exacerbated by the informal environment of the cafes and restaurants, and by the data collection method of the COVID-19 regulation. However, I need to point out that this strategy was successful also because of Enkhtuya's 'passing' and cultural privileges. Not only did she look Korean, but her Korean proficiency and knowledge of social customs, which she had acquired as a teen, when her Mongolian parents had moved to Korea for work, also allowed her to hide her foreignness wherever she went. This is what I mean by 'potential' discrimination: depending on migrant women's appearance, personal resources, and interpersonal skills with locals, they might have been able to hide their foreignness despite the COVID-19 regulations.

This being said, for undocumented labour migrant women, using the QR to attain anonymity was not such an accessible option; the QR code was only available to foreigners who had an alien registration card (or 'ARC', available for foreigners residing in Korea for longer than 90 days) (MOWH). Knowledge of the language and local social customs was also considerably limited among my undocumented respondents, who preferred to invest their time and energy into paid labour. So, without a QR code, undocumented Mongolian women relied even more on their employers to access these spaces of leisure and connection and would use their employers' QR codes and contact information. Bayjargal and Batnasan, both undocumented, shared, respectively, that:

"I didn't go to places where it said not to enter if you don't have the QR code. Sometimes, when my boss was having lunch at a certain place where the code was necessary, I would hide behind him or sneak around, and he would let me use his phone displaying the QR so that I could join."

"It was stressful at first, but actually, my phone number is under my boss's name, so every time I ran the KAKAO app [to show the QR code], my boss's name would show up [in the system]. There never was any problem when I logged in."

On the one hand, when we consider the gendered, racialisation, and classed relations that characterised Enkhtuya's presence in cafes around the city, it also becomes clearer why she preferred using the anonymous QR check-in code. Using a fake name allowed her to fit into these spaces of leisure as a Korean – and not as a Mongolian labour migrant woman – but this strategy only worked thanks to her 'passing' and cultural privileges. On the other hand, Bayjargal and Batnasan accounts show how the lack of proper legal status entailed they had no independent access to a personal check-in QR code or even a phone contract before and during the pandemic. Given the circumstances, they had to rely on their employers in order to access certain spaces or find other sites where the manual check-in was available. The increase in pandemic-driven dependency on the employers' help further deepened the uneven power relationship between the undocumented women and their employers, with possible consequences for their future relations and potential for urban citizenships.

5. Conclusion: the benefits of an intersectional approach in the study of migrant urban citizenship

In this article, I incorporated an intersectional approach to the study of migrant urban citizenship and provided insights into Mongolian migrant women's embodied relationship with urban spaces during the pandemic. Through my respondents' accounts, I illustrated the ambivalent relationship between COVID-19 regulations and urban spaces in Seoul. In practice, the pandemic did not have all positive or all negative consequences on the relationship between migrant residents and urban spaces. Rather, the relationship between COVID-19 regulations and urban spaces in Seoul was far more nuanced, resulting in what I categorised as spaces of *escape*, of *fear*, and of (potential) *discrimination*. Even within the same spaces, migrant women with different visa statuses and embodied social divisions experienced regulations and the urban – in other words, their urban citizenships – differently.

Now, drawing from my data and analyses, I would like to argue that there are two major advantages from applying intersectionality to the study of migrant urban citizenship. First, this conceptual framework can enrich our understanding of the mutual relationship between the city and disenfranchised residents' embodied experiences of wider context-dependent power dynamics (Beebeejaun, 2017; Fenster & Misgav, 2015; Irazabal & Huerta, 2016). Second, through this approach, the role of migrants' legal status is analysed critically for its potential in shaping migrant urban citizenships. A migrant is not to be understood as an essentialised subject, whose subjectivity, identity, and experiences wholly and exclusively depend on their being a migrant in a city (Cohen & Margalit, 2015). Scholars need to acknowledge that, depending on the host country's national migration policies, a certain visa type will result in specific embodied power dynamics in the city's 'real' spaces (Gebhardt, 2016, p.848). To recap, I argue in favour of an intersectional approach to the study of embodied migrant urban citizenships that is also critical of migrants' legal status, so that we can identify what other underlying power relations and processes of differentiation shape migrants' uses and perceptions of urban spaces.

Finally, I would like to argue that this conceptual framework gives researchers the opportunity to develop context-specific, effective policies aimed at increasing migrants' urban citizenship potentials. Indeed, while the conceptualisation of migrant urban citizenship as process rather than status has its strengths, as discussed in this article, urban and migration scholars alike need to figure out "how reconceptualizing citizenship as process should eventually be tied back in with discounted structures of legal and formal citizenship" (Varsanyi, 2006, p.238). Based on my research, potential policy recommendations at the city level include, for example, broadening access to urban public services (e. g., no need for an ARC number nor Korean phone number) to include temporary migrants and undocumented residents, as well as developing campaigns that normalise migrants' presence and participation in Korean cities to reduce daily microaggressions and discrimination (most policies in this regard have strong assimilationist connotations and target marriage migrant women only) (Chiu & Yeoh, 2021).

CRediT authorship contribution statement

Martina Vittoria Sottini: Conceptualization, Data curation, Formal analysis, Funding acquisition, Investigation, Methodology, Project administration, Validation, Writing – original draft, Writing – review & editing.

Declaration of competing interest

I have no conflicts of interest to disclose.

Data availability

The data that has been used is confidential.

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