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Lived experiences of migrant men witnessing and surviving sexual violence in European transit spaces

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Abstract

Background Despite increased scholarly attention to sexual violence, victimization among migrant men and boys remains under researched. This study aims to explore 1) migrant men's views on and understandings of sexual victimization, 2) their own experiences with surviving and witnessing sexual violence during their past and ongoing migration journeys and 3) the consequences of such victimization and their coping behaviors.

Results Participant observation in Brussels (Belgium) and Calais (France) preceded in-depth interviews with 39 migrant men between 16 and 47. Participants varied in age, nationality, educational level and aspired migration projects yet all of them were undocumented. They held varying, yet consistently gendered understandings of sexual violence, depicting women as victims and men as perpetrators. Although they did not explicitly label their own experiences as sexual violence, both direct and indirect forms of it were part of their past and ongoing migration trajectories. Sexual violence had a profound impact on men, inducing shame and challenging their masculine identity. Coping and prevention strategies ranged from normalizing or minimizing the violence and avoidantly forgetting, to protecting one another against future threats.

Conclusions The results advocate for safe legal migration routes, increased awareness of migrant men's vulnerabilities to sexual violence, and enhanced training and screening of professionals and volunteers working in the field.

Keywords Sexual violence, Transit spaces, Migrant men

Background

Constituting a major public health problem, the World Health Organization (1, p. 5) defines sexual violence as "*any sexual act that is perpetrated against someone's will [...] committed by any person regardless of their relationship to the victim, in any setting.*". Co-occurring with physical, emotional and socio-economic forms of violence, all migrants, forcibly displaced from their home countries due to conflict, war, or persecution, are at high risk of multiple sexual victimization [4, 15, 40]. These encompass, among others, sexual harassment, sexual abuse, (attempted) rape, sexual exploitation, forced transactional sex and sexual violence as weapon of war and torture [68]. Migrants may experience these violations personally (direct victimization) or witness them being inflicted upon others (indirect victimization), both leaving long-lasting impacts on mental health outcomes [45, 49]

While sexual violence may constitute a reason to flee in the first place, it also occurs during onward travel, in

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transit countries, and upon arrival in Europe [42]. Often used as a means of humiliation or intimidation, sexual violence frequently takes place in contexts marked by unequal power dynamics, most commonly perpetrated by strangers, smugglers, and persons in authority such as border guards and police, as well as local citizens and asylum professionals, initially assigned to care for and protect them [15, 39].

In a migratory context, research shows that sexual victimization affects men and women at more comparable rates than in the general, non-displaced population [15], with some settings showing comparable victimization rates between migrant men and women [66]. These studies revealed migrant men's and boys' heightened vulnerability to experience sexual violence at all stages of their migration journey, compared to what is globally reported in men.

In recent years, there has been increased scholarly attention to sexual violence against migrant men and boys, both during their journey to and upon arrival on European shores. For example, upon arriving at Lesvos after treacherous sea crossings, 28% of male patients in the Médecins Sans Frontières-run clinic on the Greek island disclosed having been sexually victimized [4]. En route to Europe, sexual violence against men and adolescent boys was similarly found to be widespread when passing through Libya [71]. When considering both direct and indirect victimization, rates of up to 37.20% were recorded among undocumented male Sub-Saharan migrants in Morocco [39]. In the absence of alternative options to meet basic needs or earn money, unaccompanied migrant minors in Greece, mostly male, increasingly resort to forced transactional sex or survival sex [20]. Hosted in asylum reception centers, up to 63.8% of male applicants for international protection in Belgium self-reported experiencing some form of sexual victimization in the year prior to the study [15]. Often disguised as 'police violence', certain forms of sexual violence against men – for example violently stripping bodies and intrusively searching genitals by border guards – remain unacknowledged [31, 55]. Taken together, these studies indicate that increasingly restrictive migration policies, including pushbacks and slow bureaucratic asylum procedures [5], contribute to migrants' susceptibility to sexual victimization.

Sexual violence can have manifold short- and long-term consequences for the survivor, their family, and their community [40, 72]. Yet, men are often loath to acknowledge themselves as victims, to disclose their experiences, seek help, or report the violence [41, 59]. This reluctance may be related to men's intense feelings of self-blame, shame, guilt, and fear of reprisals due to the incompatibility between (sexual) victimization and *hegemonic masculinity* [13]. *Hegemonic masculinity* embodies a series of socially accepted ways of 'being a man' as associated with physical strength, emotional stoicism, and sexual dominance [13]. "The incompatibility between this understanding of masculinity and victimization occurs both at the level of the attack itself – a man should have been able to prevent himself from being attacked – and in dealing with the consequences of the attack – to be able to cope 'like a man'" [63], p. 255).

As such, men's nonconsensual sexual experiences are not always named or interpreted as (sexual) violence [18]. In addition, the lack of services tailored to male victims' needs and inadequate practitioner approaches erect barriers to seeking and accessing care [12]. Informed by gendered norms, male victims instead tend to adopt coping mechanisms based on self-reliance, with increased risks of displaying antisocial behaviors such as aggression, risky sexual behavior, suicidal behavior, and/or substance abuse [41].

In 2024, about 208.909 individuals embarked either by land or sea on European shores, with the majority coming from Syria, Mali, and Afghanistan [35]. Although young, single[1] men accounted for the majority of migrants arriving in Europe (71%) [24], evidence on their sexual victimization remains scarce and predominantly focused on specific parts of their migration journeys (e.g. en route to Europe, at European borders, or within European reception structures). Existing research does not sufficiently account for how these experiences might vary across time and space, occurring and accumulating at different moments along men's migration paths towards and within Europe [50, 66]. "The legal production of migrant 'illegality'" [27], p. 419) keeps migrants in their (im)mobilities within, between, and beyond European states yet at high risk of sexual violence.

This dearth of research compromises our understanding on migrant men's sexual victimization, which in turn undermines the development of prevention and support interventions tailored to their specific needs, addressing different forms of victimization and at various stages of their migration journeys. Studying migrant men's experiences with sexual violence throughout their past and ongoing migration trajectories is therefore valuable.

Drawing on observations and in-depth interviews with 39 migrant men, the aim of this paper is threefold. As understandings of (sexual) victimization shape one's experiences with sexual violence, this paper first aims to explore migrant men's own views on and understandings of sexual victimization; second, it aims to examine their

[1] 'single' refers here not to one's non-marital status but to the fact that they travel on their own.

own experiences with sexual violence during past and ongoing migration journeys; and third, the study seeks to investigate the consequences of such victimization and the coping behaviors adopted by these men.

Methods

Research sites

Aspiring to reach the United Kingdom, a high number of migrants become temporarily stranded in the transit spaces of Calais and Brussels. In 2023, an estimated 36,704 migrants succeeded in crossing the English Channel using small rubber boats (accounting for 80% of total arrivals) or by boarding cargo areas of lorries [32]. While regularly going to "chance" – referring to migrants' (often multiple) attempts to cross –, these individuals have since the late 1990s been living in informal makeshift camps at various locations in the northwest of France, adjacent to the French-Belgian border [19]. The so-called "Jungle" in the port town of Calais was, in 2016, with a population of over 8,000, Europe's largest informal camp [19]. Following a growing number of migrants and the subsequent abrupt demolition of the "Jungle" in the same year, the presence of these so-called "transit" migrants extended to nearby areas in and around Grand-Synthe (Dunkirk), as well as to the capital cities of Paris and Brussels, with migrants remaining highly mobile between these different spaces [70].

In the border zone of Calais, under a 'no point of fixation' policy, French state authorities routinely evict migrants from their encampments every 48 h [36]. These evictions are accompanied by arbitrary arrests, detention, and removal of migrants, as well as the threat of and exposure to various forms of police violence [16, 33]. A network of solidarity workers and volunteers providing toilets, water, food, tents, and other materials to meet migrants' most basic needs contributes to the daily survival of those "hunted" at the border [53].

This paper is part of the first author's doctoral research project on young male migrants' lived experiences of violence in European transit spaces and its implications for their physical, mental, and sexual health and well-being. In order to explore their day-to-day experiences and grasp their lived realities, views and experiences with violence, the first author conducted multi-sited and multi-staged ethnographic fieldwork [46] in two transit spaces: Brussels in Belgium and Calais in France. Initial fieldwork took place between August 2021 and August 2022, combining participant observation with in-depth interviews with male migrants in these spaces. The same sample of participants was followed for one year after their first interview, concluding with a second follow-up interview [M2]. This paper is based on data collected during the first interview phase [M1], as well as on fieldnotes.

Participant observation

Participant observation was conducted at the *Hub Humanitaire* in Brussels and *Secours Catholique* in Calais. The *Hub Humanitaire*, situated in the Northern Quarter of Brussels, is a place where five non-profit organizations provide multidisciplinary aid to people in precarious situations, regardless of their legal status. A central part of the *Hub Humanitaire*'s operations involves the day center, which is accessible seven days a week for migrants to have a hot drink, charge their phones, play boardgames, and meet and exchange information with fellow migrants, intercultural mediators, staff, and volunteers. *Secours Catholique*, located near the city center of Calais, is a faith-based charity that runs a similar day center for migrants.

Participant observation involved volunteer work at both sites, enabling informal encounters between the researcher and (potential) participants. This, in turn, expanded the scope of the research sites, as participants invited the researcher to other significant places in their lives. In Brussels, the researcher was shown around football fields where participants exercised, NGO-run shelters, a squat where they were sleeping, and Wi-Fi spots in public spaces. In Calais, the researcher was regularly invited to the informal camps where, alongside improvised football fields, food and clothes distribution spots, a few water containers, and makeshift tents had been set up. Despite the highly hostile environment created by French national security forces, participants generously insisted on sharing self-cooked meals, engaging in conversation, and inviting the researcher to join them in football games that ran throughout the day.

Extending the field on participants' initiative allowed for the enrichment of the ethnographic data, as well as encounters with new (potential) participants in different spaces. Given the high mobility of the research population, some contacts were recurrent and maintained across time and space, as fieldwork was alternated between Brussels and Calais. The multi-sited aspect of the research, combined with the researcher's fluency in Arabic, – spoken by a majority of (potential) participants– proved invaluable in establishing rapport. Furthermore, the researcher's commitment to spending extended periods informally in the field, being physically present, casually conversing, listening to, and acknowledging their stories, greatly facilitated the building of trustful relationships. At all times, she introduced herself as a researcher studying migrant men's experiences of violence during migration. Detailed fieldnotes of observations, interactions, and the wider research context were systematically recorded.

Qualitative in-depth interviews

Following participant observation, migrant men with whom initial contact had been established were approached and invited by the researcher to participate in the study. Some men agreed on the spot, while others took their time to consider and contacted the researcher by phone at a later stage. Still others refused by either not contacting the researcher again or by stating they did not feel mentally well enough to open up, or that they were preoccupied with securing their survival. Strikingly, two men who initially refused participation later contacted the researcher upon reaching their destination, requesting to be interviewed in the United Kingdom, as they only then felt ready. However, in accordance with the research protocol, which required that the first interview take place during one's migration journey and not upon arrival, these requests were denied.

In total, 39 in-depth interviews with young and middle-aged migrant men were conducted. The interviews lasted an average of 109 min (range: 50–180 min). Masculinity, violence, and sexuality were the three central topics that guided the interviews. To initiate conversation on these topics, participants were asked at the start of the interview to draw a lifeline and identify two important life events along it. Adopting a life-course perspective aimed to center participants' identities and experiences beyond their migration histories. Life events such as the death of a parent, the birth of a sibling, or a marriage were among the most significant events indicated. In the context of revealing experiences of violence, the topic of sexual violence was introduced by acknowledging its occurrence against men during migration, thereby dismantling its presumed exceptional status. Starting from participants' own definitions of violence in general, and sexual violence in particular, different levels of accounts, – from third-hand, to second-hand, to first-hand experiences – were sequentially explored according to participants' responses (hearing about it, witnessing it, risking experiencing it, own experiences). As recommended internationally [14, 54], behaviorally oriented questions pertaining sexual violence were asked to include, across different cultures and interpretations of sexual violence, a wide range of *"sexual acts perpetrated against someone's will […]"* ([73], p. 5). Finally, participants were asked about their views regarding the presumed or experienced consequences of, and coping behaviors in response to, such violence.

During eight interviews, a certified interpreter was either physically present ($n=1$) or participated over the phone ($n=7$), translating simultaneously. Based on participants' preferences, and as the first author was sufficiently fluent and confident to conduct the conversation, the remaining interviews were conducted in Arabic ($n=14$), English ($n=13$), and French ($n=4$). Eleven interviews took place in Calais, and 28 interviews took place in Brussels.

Participants

The men, aged between 16 and 47 years old, represented various nationalities ($n=15$ Sudan; $n=13$ Eritrea; $n=2$ Burundi; $n=2$ Yemen; $n=1$ Afghanistan, Tunesia, Sierra Leone, Palestine, Cameroon, Syria, and Morocco) and varying levels of education. All participants were migrating alone, with the vast majority being unmarried, and a few ($n=4$) having their spouses and children back home. Only one participant migrated with his family, accompanied by his wife and three young children. Tables of aggregated data grouped by nationality, marital status, and age, are included below (Tables 1, 2 and 3).

The men differed in their migration routes, and their envisioned future destinations. At the time of the first interview [M1], all participants were undocumented. Although their aspirations highly fluctuated, nineteen

Table 1 countries of origin

Country of origin	Number of participants
Sudan	15
Eritrea	13
Burundi	2
Yemen	2
Afghanistan	1
Tunesia	1
Sierra Leone	1
Palestine	1
Cameroon	1
Syria	1
Morocco	1

Table 2 marital status

Marital status	Number of participants
Single	35
Married	4

Table 3 age

Average age	27 years
SD age	6.6 years
Min – Max age	16–45 years

participants aspired to migrate to the UK. Others (n = 15) had recently applied for international protection in Belgium but, as single male applicants, were denied accommodation due to a long-standing asylum reception crisis in Belgium, and were therefore compelled to (continue) living in comparable situations as those without formal asylum applications. Still other participants ($n = 5$) had their applications for international protection (AIP) (repeatedly) rejected, were travelling back and forth between European countries, were considered ineligible for an AIP in Belgium under the Dublin III Regulation, or had only just arrived in Europe and were still uncertain about where and whether to lodge their AIP.

Analysis

All interviews were transcribed and analyzed by applying thematic content analysis [6], identifying patterns or themes within qualitative data. Code-and-retrieve software NVivo 12 was used. The first author (L.L.) developed a robust code tree based on the predetermined interview (sub)themes, which included: "daily stressors", "masculinity", "health", "sexuality", "violences", and "protection". Following an initial reading of all the transcripts, additional (sub)themes that emerged from the data were incorporated into this code tree. Sexual violence emerged as a subtheme under the main theme of "violences" and was further categorized into the subcategories: "definitions", "forms", "impact", "contexts", "perpetrators", "coping", and "resistance".

To increase the analysis's credibility [30], all co-authors (I.D., C.D., M.B., I.K.) independently coded seven interviews, validating the consistency of interpretation and the coding strategy. Based on the co-authors' input, a final code tree for analysis was collaboratively decided upon. Using this final code tree, the first author (I.D., C.D., M.B., I.K.) conducted inductive line-by-line coding of all transcripts.

Ethics and positionality

Ethical clearance for the study was obtained from the University of Lille and the Commission for Medical Ethics of Ghent University. In addition, ethical aspects were constantly evaluated throughout the research and discussed with the entire research team when necessary. During participant observation, the research objectives and methodology were repeatedly explained during informal encounters. Through written and audio-recorded information sheets in different languages, all interviewees were further informed about the research conditions and asked to provide their written informed consent. Twenty-one interviews were, upon consent, audio-recorded, and notes were taken during 18 interviews.

After each interview, regardless of the experiences disclosed, the researcher checked in with the participant about the feelings and thoughts the conversation evoked and provided information on appropriate, low-cost, and accessible local health and psychosocial support services. When requested, the researcher assisted in confidentially referring participants to these services. To protect the privacy of participants, all names used in this paper are fictional.

The researcher's positionality as a young, white,[2] female researcher with Belgian nationality and affiliated with universities from the Global North may have influenced the fieldwork and the interactions between her and the participants in several ways. Connecting with her and, by extension, participating in the research might have been considered by some participants as a potential gain in social capital in a new and unfamiliar country. During fieldwork, the researcher was regularly approached with requests for various forms of support. In response, the researcher referred participants to relevant organizations whenever possible, while consistently emphasizing her identity as a researcher rather than a professional caregiver or NGO-representative.

Some men were protective towards her, particularly in locations where organizations were not present, such as the squats in Brussels or the camps in Calais. In these settings, participants would, for example, advise her to be cautious in interacting with other men, warning that "*there are crazy people here*", or would escort her through corridors or to the camp entrance.

When discussing sexuality and violence, most participants were vocal about these topics and their experiences, often noting that "*this was the first time someone asked me about this*". Given the masculine implications surrounding (sexual) violence inflicted by other men, as the data of our study reveals, talking about these experiences to a woman may have felt easier than with a man. However, the researcher's gender also invoked feelings of shame in some participants, who expressed that "*we do not talk about this with women, never. Or only with your wife you can talk about this.*" Only a few men refused to discuss these topics. A small number asserted their masculinity during interviews by overtly detailing their sexual performances and prowess.

Finally, the researcher's gender, – intersecting with her being a young adult and her genuine engagement in studying these men's lived experiences, which they are seldom asked about – led some participants to express romantic or sexual interest. After repeatedly asserting professional

[2] 'white' here refers not to skin color per se yet to a social, privileged position.

boundaries, a few men lost interest in participating or withdrew at a later stage. Two were ultimately excluded from the research for repeatedly failing to respect indicated boundaries.

Results

Men's views and understandings of sexual violence

Throughout the research, *sexual violence* was a term that was understood and used in different ways. Various terms were cited, sometimes used interchangeably. Sexual violence was most often understood as "rape". A few participants spoke synonymously about "sexual exploitation" or "exploitation", while others used the term "harassment". One participant unpacked sexual violence as "being forced to do sex without willing", whereas others more implicitly referred to "doing it by force" or "being taken by force".

Waheed, a man from Afghanistan, stressed the mental aspect in his understanding of sexual violence: "*For example, someone is walking and you forcefully catch them and rape them or perpetrate this action with them […] and they are not mentally ready for it. This is a negative act: it is one-sided, it is enforced and there is no coordination*". Others' understanding similarly differed according to the context and the victim-perpetrator relationship in which the violence occurred. Montasser, from Syria, distinguished sexual violence from rape: "*Sexual violence is between a man and his wife. I mean, at home, in the family. Rape is between any man and any woman, it is possible on the road, possible in the forest and possible at sea*", the latter implying the perpetrator is unknown to the victim.

Most participants' understanding of sexual violence were deeply gendered, viewing it as a form of violence predominantly– if, according to some, exclusively– experienced by women. Musaab, a man from Sudan, envisioned sexual violence as involving a female victim and a male perpetrator: *"If I ask her and she says no and I take her by force, this is rape […] but if she is a woman, if she did this to me, then it is normal. If I enforced that, then this is rape".* Underpinning these myths, some believed that men would be physically unable to be forced to have sex *("how can his penis become hard when he doesn't want it?"*), that in case of sexual violence *"men resist"* or *"can, at least, protect themselves"*, and that men are always ready and willing to engage in sex with women – rendering it impossible for a woman to force a man into such acts.

Similarly, sexual violence against men was often associated with, or considered equivalent to homosexuality, with the perpetrator presumed to be male. This presumed association rendered male sexual violence an absolute taboo for some participants. For Iyas, a man from Sudan, "*it is not allowed by my religion to know about that [sexual violence]".* However, situating sexual violence against men within a migratory context, Youssef, from Sudan, explicitly detached the issue from homosexuality: "*[I am] not thinking they [the border guards] are gay, it's just some sort of violence".*

Men's experiences with sexual violence

These abovementioned understandings and views on sexual violence strongly shaped men's narratives of their own experiences with violence and victimhood. Recounting their experiences, sexual violence was a recurrent element when talking about women's experiences they witnessed on the way to and in Europe. Within these accounts, the violence encountered by themselves as men was often contrasted with that of women, described as less severe and, by some, even relativized. In doing so, women's physical weaknesses were emphasized and contrasted with men's physical strength and endurance. Aman, from Eritrea, explained: "*Women get raped […] but the boys only beating or shooting or torture".* As this account exemplifies, violence experienced by men was typically recounted as being of a physical nature and labelled as torture, even when unwanted sexual acts were involved. The men's experiences often involved a combination of physical, mental, and sexual violence, although the latter was not clearly emphasized or explicitly named as such. Latif, a man from Palestine, recounted his experience of being illegally pushed back at the Serbian-Hungarian border. There, the border guards "*would beat us and kick us until they got tired*", after which they would "*load us into an old lorry*". Crammed together in the vehicle and driven back to the border, "*they [the border guards] did not drive the lorry on the paved road; instead they drove it over stones and soil so that we would not receive oxygen. Sometimes they allowed clothes, [sometimes not]".*

Nevertheless, the participants reported hearing many stories about the sexual victimization of other migrant men, whether through the news, community members, or peers. Mubarak, a Sudanese man, shared: *"We see it [sexual violence against male migrants] on the news all the time, or some people who are there at the camp […] They tell us what happened".*

Reflecting a normative and gendered view and understanding of (sexual) victimhood, the men in this study rarely named or interpreted their own experiences as sexual violence. Yet, from a public and global health perspective – which defines sexual violence broadly as *"any sexual act perpetrated against someone's will […]"*([73], p. 5) – both indirect and direct victimization surfaced in some of the men's narratives.

Indirect victimization

Most participants revealed that they had witnessed sexual violence against female migrants, either hearing the violence from a distance or seeing it happen in front of them. In these situations, the powerless position in which men were placed by the perpetrators – and thus their inability to defend or protect their female counterparts – was repeatedly stressed. Protecting women along the way, especially family members or those from the same ethnic or national group, was considered a man's responsibility and closely tied to the concept of honor. Nasser, from Sudan, stated: "*If the girl is Sudanese, then I can risk my life for her, this is what we call honor […] if this Sudanese is subjected to something, I feel responsibility […] this is a duty for being a man*". Similarly, an Eritrean participant, Filemon, described how he had to witness the gang rape of "*an Eritrean woman [with whom he shares] the same blood […] you cannot leave your sister being hurt or letting her die*".

One participant indicated that the men were deliberately held in such submissive positions to humiliate them. He recounted being locked inside a nearby room or cellar, from where they "*could hear them enjoying*", or being threatened as he "*tried to protect her but they shoved the gun in my face*". Another participant recounted how, during treacherous crossings, marriages between men and women were made up, presenting themselves as a family unit to protect one another. However, Mussa, a man from Sudan, shared how – even in the presence of female partners and children –the (threat of) sexual violence against women was used as a tool to humiliate men in their roles as partners and fathers. He narrated: "*I had a friend with his wife and their children; they were with us on the boat […] the police assaulted him and threatened to throw him in the water. My friend got scared, and despite that, the police were provoking him by saying 'go inspect her (his wife)'. They even told him that they would force his wife to take off her clothes in front of everyone […] then hold her like this, he was provoking him, to humiliate him.*"

Direct victimization

Several accounts pointed to sexual harassment – sexual violence where no physical contact was involved, yet one's physical and sexual integrity was violated. In these instances, participants mostly spoke about being ordered by border guards, smugglers, or police to forcibly undress at border crossings, while caught in the forest, or in smugglers' compounds. Montasser, from Syria, recalled how this forced undressing and nudity happened to other men in front of him while attempting to cross the Belarusian-Polish border: *"Many men were beaten in front of me, they broke their hands and broke their legs. They forced them to take off their clothes, in the snow, in the twelfth month (December) and the first month (January). It's very cold."*

While being held in smugglers' compounds or prisons, Hakim, from Eritrea, described the conditions in which, after several weeks, they were allowed to take a shower and change clothes in the presence of fellow migrants with whom he was imprisoned. He explained: "*[…] At that time, more than five people take shower together. They give water in a small container, they give you your clothes and go five people wash together. They don't have time, they ask to go without clothes in front of girls, in front of men also.*"

While these experiences took place along the men's migration journeys to Europe, other incidents occurred in informal shelters and host families, where the perpetrators were individuals in an authority position to protect and care for the migrants. One participant recalled the experience of a male friend who was staying in a Belgian host family: "*After three days, he invited my friend to spend the evening together. When he entered the living room that evening, the man was dressed in women's lingerie and offered my friend to have sex. If he refused, he had to leave, again on the street*".

Sexual violence involving physical contact, first of all, included unwanted touching. In this context, being ordered to forcibly undress, followed by (naked) body searches by police and border guards, was commonly cited. A few participants had experienced unwanted touching by fellow migrants in the context of unwelcome intimate or sexual advances. Abdo, a Sudanese man, illustrated the contrast between a friend's touching and that of a stranger: *"That [touching his body] happens all the time. I mean like,… if he is my friend and he is joking, it's ok. But he, if he is not joking and I don't know the guy very good, then yes it will be a problem because sometimes yes, people I don't know they trying to, yes, but I say no."*

Secondly, sexual violence was, in some cases, cited as a torture technique, mostly perpetrated by smugglers to blackmail one's family into sending money to fund their further travels into Europe. One participant considered torture to include the "*rape of young men*", while others described the beating of bodies "*on all parts*", including the genitals, and their electrocution with wires. Although genital areas were targeted, Abdo from Sudan believed these to be incidental. He cited: *"They are not going to beat you in sensitive places, for it is sensitive. It is just when you get it, where you get it, just get it."*

Thirdly, in a few accounts, (attempted) rape of men was mentioned as occurring in the country of origin during armed conflict, while in prison, in transit countries outside Europe such as Libya, or at border crossing points throughout Europe. Bashir, a man from Sudan, speaking about his time in prison in Sudan, explained how

rape was highly prevalent there and intentionally used to *"hurt you badly"*. Bashir further shared: *"Some of them got raped. A lot of them to be honest. Yes, if you are, I don't know, good looking and they just want to hurt you badly, they are just going to rape you, yes. It's normal."*

Faheem, a young man from Sudan, recounted the time he was held at a smugglers' compound in Libya. He recalled his experience with one of the bosses of his compound, who groomed him by providing water and food "and finally telling me to have sex with me". Faheem continued: *"They do that [rape] also for the boys because they try to me and I am sure they did it for some people"*. Waheed from Afghanistan, who migrated along the Eastern European Balkan route, referred to the experiences of minor boys, who, according to him, were mostly at risk of experiencing sexual violence. Although he did not experience or witness it himself, he explained: *"On the way there are some children, underage, they are kind of beautiful and they get harassed on the route [...] they are harassed and forced to do this act [sex], sometimes, in some conditions"*.

After arriving in Europe, the most common form of sexual violence that recurred in the narratives was forced transactional sex. Many participants accounted receiving invitations from male and female citizens on the street, as well as professionals, volunteers, or members of host families, to have sex in exchange for money, shelter, food, cigarettes, showering, clothes, or help during the crossing. Aman, from Eritrea, talked about the experiences of his friends who were hosted for a week in a Belgian family: *"In some places they ask us to have sex with them, some women ask us to make sex with them. And like that. They ask like that"*.

Consequences of sexual violence on men

Experiencing sexual violence was perceived as leaving a profound impact on men's lives. Youssef, from Sudan, talked about its lifelong impact on a survivor's life –whether male or female –and compared it to taking away their life: *"Someone who has hurt you because just for some temporary pleasure, you have ruined the whole human being's life. You have changed the whole course of his life. That's like taking his life"*.

With sexual violence standing in contrast to expectations of hegemonic, heterosexual ideals of masculinity, the most frequently cited impact of sexual violence on men was on their gender identity. For Imran, a young Eritrean man, the humiliating experience of witnessing sexual violence in which he, *"as a man, [I] couldn't do anything"*, caused frustration, powerlessness, and *"until now, [I have] a problem in my head"*. As he recounted this, he repeatedly slammed both hands down, visibly expressing a deep frustration that persisted to this day. Participants recounted how similar experiences also impacted the way in which others, in particular female migrants, perceived them. Aman, an Eritrean man, spoke about his female peers blaming them for not intervening during sexual violence, simultaneously depriving them of their masculine identity. He accounted: *"Some girls say like that: 'you are not men,' 'why you see like that?,' 'why you don't do like anything?' [...] some of them they say like that to us, that we are women, why don't [you] try to solve, try to help"*. This 'emasculation' by women, in turn, trickled down to one's self-perceived masculine identity, with Aman bluntly stating about himself: "*You feel like [you are] a woman"*. With these words, he literally ascribed himself a female identity, associated with passivity and subjugation, reflected in the humiliating position he found himself in.

Following Hakim's experience of forced nudity and having to shower in the presence of fellow migrants, he felt deeply ashamed afterward, especially in front of the girls, "*not wanting to greet them, not wanting to stay in front of them"*.

As the majority of participants originated from heteropatriarchal societies, including countries where homosexual relations are forbidden, the impact of rape on women and men was perceived differently: "*It's different for men, it's so different. Especially in our country, these things are strictly forbidden [...] So, if you get these things, it is difficult psychologically"*. Here, no distinguishment was made between consensual homosexual sex and rape. Abdo, a Sudanese man, hesitantly put the impact of rape on a man's "*normal feelings*" into words: *"For a man? Is very bad impact, you mean, if you don't want to, I mean they will, it's very bad, I mean like, they will, I don't know, maybe they will make you... I don't know how to describe it to be honest. It is not good for you to be raped. It will hurt your feelings a lot [...] the normal feelings that you are a man and this should not happen to you"*. Ridwan's account, a man from Eritrea, aligned with this understanding – that upon rape, "*you are murdered as a man. (...). Everybody says like that*". Again, sexual violence was presumptively understood as perpetrated by another man and therefore associated with homosexuality, generating the male rape myth that sexual violence is less severe or even not a problem for people who identify as homosexual: *"If you are homosexual, it is not a problem. If he is homosexual, I think the problem is less. But if he is not homosexual, it is difficult"*. Others believed that men are turned homosexual after having experienced rape, while for some it depended on who is penetrating and who is penetrated: "*The one who penetrates is a man"*, whereas the one who is penetrated is "*no longer a man [...]"*.

In stories of participants where women forced men into sexual acts, the impact on the man involved was

minimized, belittled, or even disregarded. Musaab, a participant from Sudan, stated: "*I am man, I am not girl […] this is not, not problem, you know*". In a similar vein, Youssef, from Sudan, perpetuated the belief in male stoicism by stating that, regardless of the perpetrator's gender, *"A man forgets [sexual violence], yet never forgives. […] he can move on with his life. This is nothing"*.

Coping and prevention upon sexual victimization

Participants' experiences with sexual violence took place alongside multiple, overlapping forms of violence and exploitation and a daily struggle for the fulfillment of their basic needs. Physical, psychological, and economic violence from smugglers, border guards, and police were omnipresent in all the narratives. *"It's normal"*, cited Philippe, a participant from Burundi, *"it's normal that they do like that [beat us]"*. Other forms of violence and suffering alike, participants persistently normalized sexual violence, left it undistinguished from other forms of violence, and considered it a part of their migration journey. These ideas persisted within the community: *"They say for the girls, if she takes this way, that means that she is ok with all that [sexual violence]"*.

Situating his experience in time and space, Omar, from Yemen, said: *"At that time, it's normal […] you accept these things, you tell to yourself 'it's normal'"*. Normalization similarly applied to the context of forced transactional sex with some participants framing this as normal, intelligible and even to be expected, especially when demands were voiced by females.

It was apparent that several participants firmly stated to have avoidantly "forgotten" experiences such as sexual violence, to have *"erased that part of [their] life"* or to have "*completely deleted these [experiences]"*. One participant pointed out that he did not care about the past, as *"it makes me a problem if I think about anything bad in the past"*. The account of Abdo, from Sudan, aligned to this coping mechanism yet pointed to the gradual pace of it: *"Now I forget way by way but until now it's in my memory"*.

In the face of sexual violence, participants upheld beliefs on ways how to protect themselves and others in case they would be confronted with sexual violence. Most frequently cited was men's protection of each other, in particular when travelling in group. In this scenario, Yonas from Eritrea, pointed out the impossibility for sexual victimization against men occurring: *"If men are in groups, they cannot do sex unwillingly"*. Faheem, from Sudan, explained how, as a young man, he felt protected by older male adults he was travelling with; the adults served as spokespersons and advocated on his behalf to the smugglers' leaders ('big bosses'), yet he indicated that – as men – they couldn't do the same on behalf of the girls: *"They [adults] told me, if he [alleged smuggler] calls you, give some signs to us, like that they can protect me and speak. […] They can speak with the big bosses so he knows that he is doing like that for the boys but for the girls, we cannot speak"*.

In the context of unwanted invites for transactional sex, some participants either refused or neglected these demands. Moussa, from Sudan, stated how he would react differently if the same happened in his country of origin:*"[Here, if] they come to you and tell you have sex with me […] then we keep walking, not to interact. But if it was in Sudan, you will beat him, because we don't know it like this"*.

Discussion

This study sets out to document male migrants' lived experiences of sexual violence during their migration trajectories to and within Europe. Albeit remaining largely invisible, underacknowledged, and under-researched in migrant men and boys, sexual violence was found to be part of their experiences during both past and ongoing migration trajectories. The study offers insights into how migrant men conceptualize and understand sexual violence, shaping the way they label, interpret, and narrate their own experiences. Our results also reveal the gendered impact of sexual violence on migrant men, as well as some of the coping strategies adopted in response to such experiences.

Sexual violence, in different forms and varying between and within migration stages, appeared deeply intertwined with power imbalances, manifested in migrants' lack of legal residence, material means, or financial resources to continue their aspired migration projects. As increasingly documented in recent years by official agencies such as UNHCR [3] and Médecins Sans Frontières [48], border and police guards were cited as perpetrators of forced undressing and naked body searches. These traumatic encounters might cause distrust in judicial bodies and eventually deter migrants to seek formal help or report the violence to the police [15]. The findings also confirm previous studies (e.g. [1, 15, 40], that reveal a significant portion of perpetrators to be individuals expected to support migrants, either professionally or on a voluntary base. In these settings, particularly in the context of hosting migrants in one's home, forced transactional sex was most commonly cited. White, middle-aged (often single) women are frequently overrepresented among those hosting migrant men, most of whom are under 30 [47]. The gendered and racialized dynamics of these solidaristic encounters warrant careful attention [64]. Stavo-Debauge [65] argue that, from the hosts' viewpoint, such relations of solidarity are closely intertwined with heteronormative and racialized representations — notably

the hyper-sexualization and exoticization of Black bodies – rooted in colonial history. These stereotypes may render it even less likely that their victimization will be taken seriously by others [7]. Given the highly sensitive and complex nature of this topic, which lies outside the scope of this research, future research would do well to investigate it further.

Although forced witnessing of sexual violence is commonly described in conflict settings (e.g. among others, Bosnia-Herzegovina, eastern DRC, and Myanmar [56, 67]), it goes often overlooked in migration contexts [66]. Forced witnessing of sexual violence against female migrants, constituting a form of indirect sexual victimization, left a profound impact, which relates to one's views on masculinity.

Despite coming from different countries, and although the social construction of masculinity differs across age, race, class, religion, and sexuality [57], our participants shared some traditional views on what it means to be a man: primarily providing and protecting. Aligning with the weaponized framing of sexual violence against men as an act of destruction, this form of indirect sexual violence was experienced by our participants as a public humiliation, strategically used to hold them in subordinated positions to other men such as smugglers, border guards, or police [28, 59]. Through subordination and "devaluation of gendered others, as well as those othered by race or sexuality" ([23], p.83), militarization reinforces and enhances the masculinity of those protecting national borders against racialized "Others".

Upon witnessing sexual violence, men's ability to protect themselves and others is publicly challenged and compromised, creating a discrepancy with their culturally contingent masculine expectations. This act "displaces men from their gendered personhood" (p. 1115), temporarily disrupting their masculine selves and roles, and subordinating them within gendered hierarchies [60]. For the men in this study, living within heteropatriarchal gender relations, this experience left them feeling that a homosexual and/or feminine identity had been imposed upon them [28]. Deviating from their culturally idealized male gender norms, the participants struggled with feelings of shame, gender confusion, guilt, fear, and stigma [62]. Stigmatization upon sexual violence, as argued in a recent study of Rose [58], functions as a strong instrument of power, employed to sustain established gender hierarchies and norms, and to socially "punish" those who deviate from them. In our narratives, this also materializes in a profound shift in the relationships between male and female migrants. In the eyes of the latter — themselves living within the same patriarchal gender norms and expectations — male victims are seen as violating traditional masculine roles, such as that of protector, and are therefore perceived as weak, incapable, and, in some cases, no longer fully 'man'.

The men in this study varied in their understandings about sexual violence, yet all rarely labeled their experiences as such. A traditional reading of masculinity was closely linked to stereotypical views on sexual violence, most notably reflecting the *ideal victim theory* [10]. This framework positions the victim as female, weak, engaged in respectable activities, and therefore perceived as innocent [10]. In contrast, men were mostly considered the perpetrators of sexual violence while being invulnerable to becoming victims themselves. By connecting victimhood to femininity, the men normalized and legitimized sexual violence against women, thereby anticipating that its impact on female victims would be less significant than if the victims were male. Minimal impact of sexual violence was also assumed for homosexual men, linking male sexual violence – and in particular male rape – to homosexuality and reflecting the myth that homosexual men must 'enjoy' sexual violence [37]. This thinking not only minimizes other groups' experiences with sexual violence – including women, non-heterosexual men, trans, and non-binary people – but also serves to sustain – as initially theorized by Kelly [38] – the continuum of sexual violence against them, with everyday violence being deeply rooted in the heteropatriarchal system.

The comprehensive model of the help-seeking process following sexual violence, as developed by DeLoveh and Cattaneo [17]), reveals the "complex and loaded nature of labeling" (p. 71) and its crucial role in taking help-seeking decisions, including disclosures to others. Non-disclosure, partial disclosure, or delayed disclosure of – and help-seeking for– sexual violence may lead to deteriorating health conditions and worsen mental health sequelae, such as the development of PTSD [43]. Our participants were often found to deny nonconsensual sexual acts as sexual violence and not label them as such, minimize their impact, and consequently be less likely to consider seeking help [17, 22]. The perceived incompatibility between hegemonic notions of masculinity – as aspired by the men in this study – and victimhood, especially when involving sexual dimensions, erects additional barriers to identifying and labeling one's own experiences as sexual violence and ultimately to seeking help [8].

Supporting previous arguments by Sivakumaran [63], our participants instead rather classified their experiences as physical violence or torture, even when sexual violence formed part of those experiences. Similarly, in the work of van Tienhoven [69], care providers working in Dutch asylum reception centers did not necessarily interpret torture as sexual violence, even when it includes the beating of sexual organs causing genital injuries. It could be argued that deeply entrenched

heterosexual framings of sex – viewing men as "intrinsically proactive and the initiators of sexual activity" ([21] p. 1161), as well as actively penetrating rather than being penetrated and/or receiving semen (in case of male-on-male sexual violence) – might render the intertwining between violence and sex incongruent, problematic, and thus unimaginable or impossible to occur (to them) [21, 61]. Omitting the sexual aspect might have to do with one's available grids of intelligibility [25], shaping one's understandings of sexual violence, its nature, impact, the individuals it can affect, and the cultural narrative and the vocabulary surrounding it [9, 11]. Male victims might, even if they wish to disclose, not find the right words to express themselves or explain what happened [44, 63].

While avoidant coping mechanisms can be related to men's expected emotional stoicism, inherent to *hegemonic masculinity* [13], in the midst of ongoing violence and in its aftermath – as in this study's fieldwork sites – not considering, distinguishing, or uttering one's experiences as sexual violence may also constitute a self-protective, internal coping strategy in response to trauma. This strategy embodies resilience and affects the possibility of resistance [2, 17]. The men in this study repeatedly normalized, or even expected violent experiences – including sexual violence – to happen [26, 34]. In parallel with the study of Keygnaert et al.[39], sexual violence was often be considered collateral damage on the migration route.

Palillo [51, 52], in his work with young Sub-Saharan African men arriving in Italy, suggests the strategical existence and reproduction of a dominant and normative masculine discourse that legitimizes violent practices and abuses against migrant men on their journeys to Europe. In presenting, reproducing, and normalizing violence as an integral part of migrant men's gendered performances and as a symbolic *rite de passage* to valued manhood, "the agential capacity of navigating dangerous situations is recognized as a key aspect of participants' gendered enterprise" [52], p. 2144). Rather than presenting themselves as victims, the men in this study framed their migration experiences, including violence, as a basis for making claims about their manhood, ascribing themselves qualities as endurance, courage, and self-reliance.

The end of this study's fieldwork in July 2023 coincided with the Illegal Migration Act 2023 becoming law in the UK, implying the detention and removal of "persons who have entered or arrived in breach of immigration control" to Rwanda [29]. Under the guise of disincentivizing people from crossing the English Channel in small boats, we argue that these harmful measures will further increase migrants' vulnerabilities to sexual violence. A lack of safe migration routes and humane living conditions upon arrival and in transit will cause migrants to repeatedly risk becoming victims of multiple forms of violence, including sexual violence.

Recommendations

Our results advocate for the provision of safe, legal migration routes when people are forced to seek refuge in a third country. Greater awareness of migrant men's and boys' susceptibility to, and experiences with different forms of sexual violence is needed, especially among professionals working in daily contact with migrant communities. It is recommended that these professionals be informed and trained in trauma-informed approaches to reduce stigmatization and prevent harmful responses to disclosures. In doing so, it is crucial to learn to recognize and respect men's own ways and paces of articulating their experiences, including indirect or vague disclosures. Additionally, professionals must be aware of the cultural and gender-specific barriers that male victims might face in labelling their experiences with sexual violence, discussing these with others, and ultimately seeking help. Finally, addressing transactional sex should begin with implementing security protocols for hiring and monitoring workers, volunteers, host families, and others in positions of power, including police and border guards. These include screening individuals and enforcing a strict zero-tolerance policy regarding any form of abusive or exploitative behavior. Creating safe reporting channels for victims could help reduce barriers to reporting unwanted sexual experiences by alleviating fears of prosecution or stigma.

Strengths and limitations

The primary strength of this study lies in its ability to conduct in-depth interviews with a substantial group of migrant men in highly vulnerable situations, while being actively engaged in their migration journeys. This approach likely minimized recall bias regarding recent and ongoing experiences. The researcher's basic proficiency in Arabic, which enabled daily conversations without a professional interpreter, proved to be invaluable. In contrast, the lack of proficiency in other languages spoken by large groups of migrants during the fieldwork – such as Tigrinya, Amharic, and Pashto – made conversations with certain communities more challenging. This limitation accounts for the underrepresentation of non-Arabic-speaking individuals in the sample. Collaborating with community researchers in future research might help address this limitation.

Conclusion

This study explored migrant men's views on and experiences with sexual violence during their journeys towards and within Europe. In doing so, it highlighted the omnipresence

of sexual violence and its close entanglement with other forms of exploitation and abuse at the hands of individuals in positions of power. Sexual violence deeply affected the men in this study, leading to feelings of shame and causing them to question their masculinity. In response, they employed coping strategies such as normalizing or diminishing the violence, intentionally erasing memories, and preventively protecting each other from future incidents. The findings emphasize the need for safe migration pathways, greater awareness of migrant men's vulnerability to sexual violence, and improved support at all stages of migrants' relentless efforts to reach safety and protection.

Abbreviation

AIP Application for international protection

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Authors' contributions

As PhD student, L.L. was responsible for the research conception and design, data collection, transcription, analysis and interpretation of the data and the drafting of the manuscript. I.K., I.D., M.B. and C.D provided substantial intellectual and moral guidance during all stages of the research, from the initial development of the research proposal, the implementation of the research, the analysis and interpretation of seven interview transcripts to the draft of the manuscript. All authors revised the draft manuscript critically and approved the final version.

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Data availability

No datasets were generated or analysed during the current study.

Declarations

Ethics approval and consent to participate

Ethical clearance was obtained from the University of Lille with reference 2022–601-S105.
Ethical clearance was obtained from the Commission for Medical Ethics of Ghent University Hospital with reference ONZ-2022–0082.

Consent for publication

All study participants provided informed consent upon the start of the data collection.

Competing interests

The authors declare no competing interests.

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