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## Sex for Shelter? Power, Precarity, and Sexual Propositions Among Male Migrants in European Transit Zones

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### ABSTRACT

**Background:** Racialized migrant men are frequently framed as deviant and hypersexual, obscuring the complexity of their intimate and sexual relationships during and upon migration. This risk narrative is partially reproduced in academic research, where the focus overwhelmingly remains on sexually transmitted infections among migrant men. Little is known about how sexual encounters unfold *during* migration journeys, where precarious legal and material conditions and unequal power relations may shape consent and coercion.

**Objectives:** This paper seeks to explore how power imbalances shape sexual propositions and sexualized exchanges between migrant men and diverse sexual partners during their onward migration journeys.

**Methods:** The paper builds on participant observation conducted in Brussels (Belgium) and Calais (France), two European spaces of transit, as well as on the interview narratives of 39 single, heterosexual migrant men living in these spaces.

**Results:** The analysis centers on encounters in which sex was proposed, implied, or expected in relation to access to shelter, resources, or support. Migrant men's sexual encounters involved different partners, occurred across diverse settings – from humanitarian settings and private homes to public streets – and involved dynamics ranging from transactional offers and emotional care to manipulative “smart ways” of solicitation, illustrating how intimacy, survival, desire, and vulnerability become deeply entangled.

**Conclusions:** Shaped by legal precarity, material dependency, racialized sexual objectification, and unequal power relations, our findings reveal that migrant men's sexual encounters during transit unfold in intimate grey zones where the distinction between consent and coercion blurs.

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### Introduction

Dominant European discourses typically depict the sexuality of migrant men – particularly those racialized as Black and/or Muslim – as deviant, uncontrollable and inherently dangerous (de Hart, 2017; Kukreja, 2023). Viewed as men for whom sexual violence constitutes a “way of pursuing sexual life” (Wojnicka et al., 2025, p. 142), racialized male migrants continue to be portrayed as alleged predators in narratives surrounding assaults on local, White European women (Boulila & Carri, 2017; de Hart, 2017; Wigger,

2019). These essentialist imaginaries, which echo colonial and Orientalist tropes of non-European men as primitive and threatening (Kukreja, 2023), pathologize migrant men and erase the nuanced ways their intimate and sexual lives are (re)formed through migration.

This framing is especially consequential in contemporary migration trends to Europe, where young adult men significantly outnumber women (Eurostat, 2025). Fleeing diverse persecutions, conflict and economic hardships, they often embark on dangerous and irregular migration

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routes alone, separated from their families. In 2024, the European Union (EU) border agency Frontex estimated that, of approximately 239,000 irregular border crossings into the EU, just over 10 percent were undertaken by women (Frontex, 2025). In the same year, men made up roughly two-thirds of all asylum applicants in the EU, most of them (37%) aged between 18 and 34 years old (European Union Agency for Asylum, 2025).

In research across the social and health sciences, the sexuality of migrant men is predominantly examined through a public-health lens, with an emphasis on their sexual health. While some recent studies have taken a broader approach by examining migrant men's experiences with sexual and reproductive health (SRH) services (Baroudi et al., 2023), and their needs for attaining positive sexual wellbeing (McDonald et al., 2024), the majority of research continues to center on migrant men's sexual risk behavior and their vulnerability to contracting and spreading sexually transmitted infections (STIs), particularly HIV/AIDS (Burns et al., 2011; Lewis & Wilson, 2017; McMichael & Gifford, 2010; Mengesha et al., 2023). The few studies that focus on migrant men's sexual health knowledge, interpretations, attitudes, and beliefs likewise tend to concentrate primarily on STI and HIV knowledge (Dean et al., 2017; McMichael & Gifford, 2009, 2010). While this existing scholarship addresses important public-health concerns and foregrounds the sexuality of non-native men, it simultaneously contributes to the construction of migration as a "health security threat" (Keygnaert, Guieu, et al., 2014, p. 221) and, more specifically, reinforces an essentialist, pathologizing narrative that rearticulates migrant men's sexuality as threatening, risky, deviant, and in need of control and containment. Less is known about the ways migrant men navigate intimate and sexual relationships throughout the migration process and upon settlement in a new country.

### ***Migration and sexual vulnerabilities***

Sex and intimacy are deeply shaped by social and cultural norms, including religion, family and community expectations, and gender roles

(Dawson & Gifford, 2001). Although migrants' sexual attitudes may align closely with those of host populations (Dune et al., 2017), studies with refugee men in Israel (Birger & Peled, 2017) and Australia (Muchoki, 2015; Russo et al., 2023) highlight that new sexual landscapes encountered through migration can broaden access to sexually explicit materials and enhance opportunities for sexual autonomy and freedom (Castleton et al., 2025). While some resist and remain constrained by norms from their cultural backgrounds and community expectations, others – particularly those migrating alone and facing isolation and loneliness in the host country – reported to enjoy enhanced sexual autonomy (Baroudi et al., 2021; Castleton et al., 2025; Muchoki, 2015). This may manifest in casual sexual relationships, with multiple partners and within transactional encounters (Jacobson et al., 2020). Still others tend to conform to new sexual norms as a societal pressure, avoiding having their masculinity and heterosexuality questioned (Fidolini, 2020).

Although migration may offer opportunities for sexual freedom – which, for some, may even motivate migration in the first place (Ahmad, 2016) – displacement can simultaneously generate sexual constraints, vulnerabilities, and precarity. Living in a state of legal uncertainty and material precarity, undocumented migrants and asylum applicants awaiting the outcome of their asylum claims tend to experience poorer sexual health compared to migrants with secure or regularized legal statuses (Baroudi et al., 2021; Keygnaert et al., 2012). In pursuit of daily survival, safety, or border passage, some are forced to engage in transactional sex (Jacobson et al., 2020). Often perpetrated by individuals in positions of authority or power (e.g., smugglers, police officers and border guards, and actors ostensibly responsible for their protection), people migrating – including men and boys – are vulnerable to experience sexual violence and exploitation during travel, transit, as well as upon arrival (Baroudi et al., 2021; Belanteri et al., 2020; De Schrijver et al., 2022; Keygnaert, Vettenburg, et al., 2014; Linthout et al., 2025).

Beyond these established vulnerabilities, less is known about how these vulnerabilities play out when migrant men – either in transit or newly

arrived – engage in intimate and sexual relationships. For example, Birger & Peled (2017) found that Eritrean men felt constrained by their lack of legal status in initiating or sustaining romantic partnerships. In Ingvars' ethnographic work (2023), men reported that as asylum seekers they felt unable to offer their partners a decent life. Navigating precarious post-migration circumstances, West Indian migrants in the United States were compelled to enter “unstable sexual partnerships” (p. 49) marked by dependency on a partner for accommodation or other forms of support (Shedlin et al., 2006, p. 49). Situated at the social margins, heterosexual Mexican labor migrants in the United States reported exposure to “sexualized negotiations”, including sexual harassment, transactional sexual interactions, and other forms of coercion – predominantly involving their White, middle-class, gay employers (González-López, 2006). Similar forms of sexual objectification have been documented among refugee men living in legal limbo in Greece, who described being treated as the “disposable exotic”, being invited to sex parties, or being asked to perform sexually in bathrooms (Ingvars, 2023, p. 8).

The literature thus demonstrates that migrant men's intimate and sexual relationships are profoundly shaped by legal precarity, economic dependency, and racialized hierarchies. What remains unclear, however, is how these forces play out in the sexual encounters that occur *during* migration journeys rather than solely in settlement contexts. This paper therefore seeks to explore how power imbalances shape sexual encounters between single<sup>1</sup>, heterosexual migrant men and diverse sexual partners during their onward migration and in transit in Europe. More specifically, we examine how migrant men experience sexual encounters in which sex is proposed, implied, or expected in relation to access to shelter, resources, or support, and how these unfold within precarious living contexts, where legal and material insecurity, dependency, and unequal social positioning can elicit a complex entanglement of sexual consent and coercion, including – but not limited to – transactional sex dynamics. In doing so, we draw on participant observation conducted in two European *spaces of*

*transit*, Brussels (Belgium) and Calais (France), as well as on the narratives of 39 single, self-identified heterosexual migrant men living in these spaces. Having fled persecution, conflict, and economic hardships, these men embarked on long and perilous irregular journeys toward Europe and, at the moment of the study, lived in conditions of legal and material precarity, often without legal status or stable housing. This paper challenges harmful stereotypes that portray migrant men as sexual “Others”, and offers a nuanced analysis of the power dynamics shaping sexual encounters they navigate during their mobility in Europe. In doing so, it advances a deeper and more nuanced understanding of these men's sexual lives.

## Methodology

This study employs a qualitative research approach in order to capture in-depth the relational, situated, and often ambiguous nature of sexual encounters unfolding in contexts of legal and material precarity and vulnerability. Seeking to understand how power imbalances shape lived experiences of intimacy and sexuality during migration, methods allowing for engagement, rapport-building, and contextual sensitivity were necessary. Qualitative fieldwork, including participant observation and in-depth interviews, was therefore selected to collect participants' narratives in their social environments and to account for the highly mobile and evolving character of transit migration.

This paper forms part of the first author's doctoral research, which explores the lived experiences of violence and sexuality among male migrants on their journeys to and in Europe. To capture these experiences, fieldwork was conducted between August 2022 and August 2024 in the transit zones of Brussels, Belgium, and Calais, France. This involved a combination of participant observations with in-depth interviews. To trace how experiences and their impact on individuals might change over time and across spaces, a longitudinal design was employed, wherein the same participants were followed over the course of one year, concluding in a second interview. This paper draws on data collected

during both interview moments [M1 and M2], as well as on field observations.

### **Research sites: Brussels and Calais**

Upon arrival in Europe, many migrants spend extended periods in so-called *spaces of transit*: spaces of passage, temporary residence, containment, and push-back that can take on both informal and institutionalized forms and may be semi-permanent, persisting for months or years, or disappear within weeks (de Vries & Guild, 2019). The city of Brussels in Belgium and the region in and around the coastal town of Calais in France are two prominent examples of such *spaces of transit* in Europe. Brussels – particularly the city’s Northern Quarter – functions simultaneously as a space of arrival, temporary settlement, and transit. While some migrants decide to apply for international protection immediately upon arrival in Belgium, others use their time in the city to consider their migration aspirations or revise initial plans in response to repeated rejections, experiences of discrimination and racism, police harassment, or limited opportunities for employment and everyday life (Düvell, 2012). Still others view Brussels as a temporary stop on their journey toward other destinations, such as the United Kingdom (UK). For those, the area’s institutionalization, reflected in the presence of organizations providing material, legal, medical, and shelter support, has turned it into an important hub to regain strength, rest, share information, and prepare for departure toward Calais.

Situated in northern France, about 160 kilometers from Brussels and just a few kilometers from Dover (UK), Calais has since the late 1990s become a space for passage and temporary residence (de Vries & Guild, 2019). In the absence of legal entry points to the UK, numerous migrants attempt to cross the English Channel on small rubber boats or by hiding in lorries. While some succeed in these dangerous crossings within days, others remain for months or even years. Despite and/or due to the detrimental living conditions and highly repressive policies – including repeated evictions of informal camps and personal belongings every 48 hours, police violence, deportations, and push-backs – a network of

humanitarian organizations, equipped with their own infrastructure, continues to provide material support, food, mobile hygiene services, medical and first psychological aid, as well as legal assistance to migrants in Calais (Van Isacker, 2021).

### **Data collection**

This study is grounded in six months of participant observation, alternatingly between two key migrant day centers: the *Hub Humanitaire* in Brussels and *Secours Catholique* in Calais. Accessible to all migrants, regardless of legal status, these day centers serve as central places where individuals can access basic necessities, including food, medical care, legal aid, clothing, and other materials such as tents and sleeping bags. They also provide electricity to charge phones, opportunities to connect with peers, cultural mediators, and social workers, and the chance to participate in sports or other organized activities.

By immersing herself in these closely intertwined spaces, the first author was able to build rapport with migrant men of varying ages, nationalities, educational backgrounds, legal statuses, and envisioned destinations. The participant sample (cfr. *infra*) reflects this diversity. During this early fieldwork phase, the researcher adopted a dual role: blending academic research with volunteer work in the respective day centers. The field extended as the researcher was – on the men’s invitations – gradually granted access to other key spaces in their daily lives. These included two squats where they resided, NGO shelters and hosting families, sports facilities where they exercised, train stations, and nearby parks. After each field visit, detailed notes were either written or audio-recorded and subsequently transcribed.

Upon familiarization with the field and the establishment of initial contacts with migrant men, in-depth interviews were conducted by the paper’s first author (L.L.). Convenience sampling was employed, inviting the migrant men the researcher encountered in the field to participate in the study. While personal contact during fieldwork was the primary means of introducing and discussing the study’s objectives, methodology,

and ethical safeguards, small multilingual flyers served as an additional tool to inform and invite interested individuals.

At the first interview moment [M1], 39 in-depth interviews were conducted, of which 11 interviews took place in Calais and 28 in Brussels. From that initial group, 15 participants took part in a second round of in-depth interviews [M2]. This study is hence based on a total of 54 in-depth interviews. Participants were asked to sketch a lifeline on paper, indicating – during M1 – two events they considered as decisive in their lives (up until then), and – during M2 – two significant events they aspired to in the future. The lifeline drawn during the first interview was used again in the second interview, giving continuity to the conversations across time. The first interviews centered on how participants, as men, experienced and made sense of (sexual) violence and sexuality throughout their past and ongoing migration journeys. The second interviews shifted focus toward changes that had taken place over the past year, as well as hopes and expectations for the future, touching on topics such as (aspired) family life, intimate relationships, marriage, and fatherhood. Reflecting the unpredictability of the men's lives, interviews were conducted in a range of nearby locations, including cafés, libraries, a meeting room at the *Hub Humanitaire* or *Secours Catholique*, and parks or grassy fields in the vicinity.

A certified interpreter in Arabic was consulted during 9 interviews, translating simultaneously either while being physically present ( $n=3$ ) or over the phone ( $n=6$ ). A certified interpreter in Pashto was consulted during one interview ( $n=1$ ). According to participants' preferences, and given the researcher's sufficient language proficiency, the remaining interviews were conducted by the researcher in Arabic ( $n=20$ ), English ( $n=18$ ), and French ( $n=6$ ). The transcription of the interviews conducted in Arabic and Pashto was carried out by three native-speaking research assistants, enhancing the accuracy and reliability of the transcripts.

At the end of

M1, participants were asked whether they were willing to be included in the follow-up study and, regardless of their location, be interviewed a

second time after one year. All but six of the initial participants agreed to take part. Follow-up contact was attempted with 33 migrants, although contact with four of them was quickly lost due to changed phone numbers or a lack of response to messages.

As the one-year mark approached, participants were formally invited to take part in the second interview via a message. From the group of migrants with whom contact had been maintained, fifteen confirmed their willingness to participate. Fourteen others declined for various reasons. One participant was traveling outside of Europe; three others reported experiencing psychological distress and therefore did not wish to speak; another was in the midst of wedding preparations and felt it would be inappropriate to meet up with another woman. One participant expressed anger after the researcher missed a call from him, which he experienced as a sign of disrespect and a reason to withdraw from the project. Three others declined without specifying their reasons. On the initiative of the research team, four participants were excluded from further participation due to inappropriate demands or actions, including sexually suggestive messages to the researcher and the repeated crossing of clearly communicated boundaries. During the course of the follow-up study, one participant sadly passed away – a reminder of the precarity and vulnerability that shaped many of these men's lives. In accordance with the participant's explicit informed consent and with careful attention to ethical considerations, including the protection of his personal information while honoring the significance of the experiences he shared with the researcher, data from his first interview were retained and included in the analysis.

For most participants, initiating conversations about intimacy, sexuality, or (sexual) violence was uncommon and often felt uncomfortable, as such topics were considered culturally taboo. Even uttering words associated with these subjects – such as, for example, "sex" – could carry connotations of impropriety or shame within their cultural norms. To navigate this barrier, the topic was introduced in a generalized way, framing it as a broader, common issue within the

population rather than as an exceptional or individual experience. The researcher explained, for example: “Research shows that transactional sex during the migration journey is common, what are your thoughts on that?”. As in this example, the researcher did not immediately inquire about the participant’s personal experiences. Instead, the line of questioning gradually explored both the participant’s opinions and their proximity to the topic, starting with what they *thought* about such experiences occurring, whether they had *heard* of them, whether they *knew others* who had gone through them, whether they had *personally felt at risk* of encountering something similar, and only eventually moving to whether they had *ever experienced it themselves*.

### Participants

Data collection of the first interview moment [M1] comprised interviews with 39 migrant men aged 16 to 47 (Mean = 27.5; SD = 6.6). All lacked secure legal status at the moment of the interview and most experienced unstable housing situations, often alternating between squats, NGO shelters, or sleeping on the street. For access to food, clothing, and medical care, many relied on day centers where NGO services were concentrated. The sample included individuals from Sudan (n = 15), Eritrea (n = 13), Burundi (n = 2), Yemen (n = 2), and one each from Afghanistan, Tunisia, Sierra Leone, Palestine, Cameroon, Syria, and Morocco. All participants, except one, had migrated alone, and most were unmarried. The one exception had traveled with his wife and three young children. Three other participants had left spouses and children behind in their home countries. All men self-identified as heterosexual. There was considerable variation in educational backgrounds, ranging from no formal education to primary and secondary schooling, as well as higher education including Master’s degrees. Two participants held a PhD.

Out of the initial sample, we conducted follow-up interviews [M2] with fifteen migrant men at their respective locations. This required the researcher to travel to various cities across Belgium (n = 8), the United Kingdom (n = 4), France (n = 1), the Netherlands (n = 1), and Denmark (n = 1). The participants represented

the following nationalities: Sudanese (n = 7), Eritrean (n = 4), Yemeni (n = 2), Burundian (n = 1), and Moroccan (n = 1). At the time of the second interview, six participants had regularized their legal status by obtaining refugee status in the countries where they had applied. Of these, four had secured stable housing, while two were still actively searching for accommodation and were temporarily staying in accommodation centers. Another eight participants were awaiting the outcome of their asylum applications and were living in accommodation centers, shared housing, or with extended family members. One participant expressed uncertainty about whether, and where, to apply for asylum. He stayed alternately at a friend’s home and in a squat. There was an average of 15 months between [M1] and [M2], ranging from 12 to 21 months (SD = 2.0).

### Analysis

This paper draws on data from both interview moments [M1] and [M2]. All interviews (n = 54) were transcribed in English and subsequently thematically analyzed (Braun & Clarke, 2006) using the qualitative data-analysis software MAXQDA24 (VERBI, 2024). For this paper, the analysis was guided by a thematic focus on migrant men’s sexual encounters. Following an initial reading of the transcripts, a preliminary code tree was developed, which included the subthemes “sexual partners”, “contexts”, “sexual stereotypes”, and “coercion vs consent”. As the inductive, line-by-line coding of each transcript progressed, additional themes emerged and were integrated into the code tree, including “strategies”, “emotional care”, “sexual agency”, and “power imbalances”. This paper does not trace patterns across participants’ longitudinal narratives. The first author (L.L.) carried out the inductive, line-by-line coding of all transcripts. To strengthen the credibility of the analysis (Guba & Lincoln, 1989), the coauthors (I.D., C.D., M.B., I.K.) independently coded seven interviews, confirming the consistency of both the coding strategy and its interpretation.

### Ethics

Ethical approval was granted by the ethics committee of Université de Lille and the Commission

for Medical Ethics of Ghent University Hospital prior to the start of data collection. However, navigating the complexities of fieldwork in volatile contexts – particularly when engaging with people on the move – required us to move beyond predictable, procedural models and the formal approvals of ethical bodies, toward what Guillemin and Gillam (2004) term, “ethics in practice”. Ethical aspects and challenges appeared *in situ* and hence required immediate, context-sensitive evaluation and decision. These were regularly discussed and reflected upon within the whole research team.

Information sheets and informed consent forms detailed the study’s objectives, methodology, and confidentiality measures and were provided in both written and audio formats. At the beginning of each interview, all participants provided written informed consent to: (1) understand the purpose and expectations of the study; (2) participate voluntarily; (3) be assured that their personal information would remain strictly confidential; and (4) know they could withdraw from the study at any time. During the first interview phase, twenty-one participants consented to having their interviews audio-recorded, while written notes were taken during the remaining eighteen interviews. In the second interview phase, all fifteen participants agreed to audio recording. Fictional names have been used in this paper to protect the identities of the participants.

Adhering to the “duty of care” (Pittaway et al., 2010) for those involved in the study, the researcher engaged the participant in a post-interview debriefing to explore any thoughts or emotions the discussion may have elicited. A comprehensive mapping of locally appropriate, available, accessible, and affordable services for migrant men enabled information sharing and, if the participant wished, active referrals were made, through which the researcher supported the participant in accessing specific services .

### **Positionality**

For some, the researcher’s identity as a young, white European woman may have facilitated in speaking about sexuality. There exists a perception that, in Europe, talking about sex is normal,

sometimes even expected. Some participants may have found it easier to engage with the topic when she introduced it, aligning with their assumptions about “European openness”. For some participants, being interviewed by a woman appeared to lower the pressure to conform to masculine norms, creating space to share intimate aspects of their lives that questioned or challenged these norms, such as experiences of (sexual) victimization. At the same time, the opposite pattern was also observed: some men sought to assert their masculinity during the interviews by overtly highlighting their sexual performances and perceived sexual popularity. Finally, not being part of their community may have softened certain cultural norms and taboos, lowering the barriers to speaking openly. Conversely, for some men, discussing intimate topics with a woman – especially a young, white, European woman – may have felt inappropriate, which could have made my positionality a barrier to participation. Yet this remains speculative, as we do not know the reasons why certain individuals declined to take part.

The longitudinal aspect of this study’s methodology involved the development of long-term research relationships with migrant men, maintained through regular in-person meetings or phone conversations, depending on participants’ mobility and circumstances. In attempting to become part of their lives, the research component of these relationships at times became blurred – or even momentarily forgotten – occasionally evolving into forms of friendship marked by indistinct boundaries. Defining, navigating and indicating these boundaries became an ongoing, *in situ* process of reflection, negotiation, and personal development. In the context of systemic dehumanization and social marginalization of men as migrants in Europe, the researcher’s sustained kindness and genuine interest in their lives were sometimes perceived as exceptional and uncommon, leading in certain cases to the emergence of sexual and/or romantic interest. In a few instances, repeated boundary setting and explicit refusal resulted in the loss of participants from the study.

### **Results**

Participants shared multiple accounts of migrant men – either themselves or others – being

approached, propositioned, or otherwise expected by both men and women to engage in sexual activity, both during transit and their initial settlement in Belgium or France. Some participants framed these encounters as “up to him, if he is older than 18, to decide [...] to accept, yes or no”, yet many narratives revealed that sexual consent was far more nuanced and complex, shaped by power asymmetries and precarious living conditions.

### **Sex for shelter**

“I ask myself: why? Why do they want to impress people [migrants] when they have nothing?”. Speaking to the social, legal, economic, and psychological precarity experienced by many migrants in our study, Filemon, a young Burundian man, expressed his perplexity about sexual advances, propositions, and expectations directed at migrant men. These encounters ranged from explicit propositions for sex in exchange for money, material benefits, or both, to more subtle offers framed as acts of kindness – food, a shower, or a place to stay – that were later revealed to come with expectations of sex. One of the men in our study experienced enhanced work opportunities following sexual intercourse with a female job service coordinator. Sometimes, the outcome of the sexual encounter appeared less clearly defined. Describing interactions with older local women, Filemon recounted: “My friend told me in his own words: ‘If you feel like fuck them, you fuck them, and then they give us something, and we become friends like that’”.

The majority of these advances unfolded within dependent relationships shaped by caregiving, either professional or voluntary. Our narratives revealed migrant men’s experiences of receiving sexual invitations within local, well-known NGOs and shelters. One participant reported that a man, posing as a volunteer and thus appearing to be offering help during a meal distribution, “asked for the underage, even for overage, to have sex.” He continued: “Me I know the guy, he asks to help the people since when I am here and still doing that. But when the guys told me he asks for sex, I didn’t trust him”.

Accounts from the second interview phase, when most participants had moved into state-provided accommodation centers or collective housing, showed that these environments were not always experienced as safe or protective either. Living in an accommodation center for asylum seekers, Filemon told: “You are at the center, that is true, but you don’t really have a home [...] and for someone to make that kind of offer [transactional sex], it’s much easier.”

In the absence of state-provided accommodation<sup>2</sup> and with NGO-led shelters operating beyond capacity, a solidarity network of citizens has emerged in and around Brussels to host migrants in their own homes. This form of private hospitality offers much-needed shelter to those in need, yet, in few instances, it engenders relations of dependency and loyalty within personal and intimate spaces, occasionally resulting in blurred sexual boundaries and facilitating the potential for abuse.

A few men recounted being approached by men and women while wandering the streets, hanging around, or resting in public parks, feeling sexually targeted based on visible markers such as gender, skin color, perceived nationality, and signs of precarity (e.g., worn clothing, unkempt appearance) or psychological distress. In Calais, these markers, combined with migrants’ tendency to appear in small groups or near impoverished camp settlements, often result in them being categorized as refugees, which increases their vulnerability to sexual targeting.

During fieldwork in Calais, participants described encounters with men exploiting these perceptions. For instance, an older man driving near a camp would slow down, open his window, and call out to young migrant men, expressing that he “wants and desires a guy to have sex with him”. Similarly, Bashir, a man from Sudan, recounted: “A guy comes in a car, you can go with him... He used to come with clothes in the Jungle, and asks them to do this and that [sex], and tell them he’ll pay them”. Omar, similarly from Sudan, described comparable experiences: “It happened to me around seven times. They offered me money, cigarettes, accommodation. [It happened] mainly in Greece. Even here in

France. The guy near the food place [...] he offered me 100 euro”.

“They observe you for a while, they see you are in a complicated situation, and they profit from the weakness you show at that moment,” reflected Umran, a young man from Eritrea, describing how visible signs of vulnerability are often exploited. He narrated how he met a woman on the street, near the Brussels North station, “asking me weed and crack and she would fuck me instead”. Edward, a young man from Sierra Leone, recalled being approached by strangers<sup>3</sup> in a similar way in Brussels: “I was bored and just sitting there [on a bench] and people came to ask me to do it for €20”. Another participant shared that visible signs of emotional distress or sadness could also attract sexual attention: “When they see you are stressed, women come to you to talk to you first and have sex after.”

### ***Nothing but a (Black) body***

The migrant men’s narratives in this paper reveal experiences of sexual objectification, where sexual encounters were perceived as one-sided and motivated solely by “the pleasure of sex, nothing more”, centered on satisfying the other party’s desires. Adil, a man from Sudan, spoke to the ungendering effect of these relationships which, again, implicitly reinforced their objectifying nature: “At that moment, they don’t see you as a man [...] it is only for their sexual desire.”

Our narratives also highlight how racialization permeates sexual invitations and encounters. Several participants highlighted the recurring beliefs that “white women really love African sex”, reflecting deeply entrenched racialized sexual imaginaries that frame Black men’s bodies, abilities and desires in stereotypical ways. One man recounted being suddenly approached in Brussels by a white man, fetishizing his Blackness: “He wanted Black, blah, blah, blah. And, you know, he said he would give me €100 for one hour, I don’t know, I don’t remember, or maybe for one night”. Common assumptions included the beliefs that Black men have large penises, possess exceptional sexual power and endurance, and are always ready for sex. Bisrat, a

young man from Eritrea reflected on these ideas from his own experiences: “All the time, in the mind of them [European women] it is like, he is African, he is new in Europe, he is like strong. If she asks to a European guy, she will not have the same feeling, she will not enjoy the same enjoying [...] I’m sure she thinks what about me? Because I am Black and Black is all the time strong and she can enjoy all the night with you”.

Reflecting on the effects of these stereotypes, Umran explained how he felt that Black men – and, by extension, their bodies – were reduced to mere, disposable objects of sexual desire and utility: “People look at the Black as sexual tools, just like a tool, [to] use it in the sex [...] the only good thing about the Black man is a tool, just use it for the sex when he want [...] and finish. This is the bad things, I saw it.”

Along these lines, several men bluntly described these sexual interactions not as consensual, but as “a form of submission”, and some even likened them to slavery and its inherent violence. While clearly revealing the transactional nature of the situation, one participant explained: “It’s violence, almost violence. It’s like they play with your mind. Yeah, they play with your mind, or they have something on you, you know, and they can use it. Like not having papers. If you ask her, like, I would like to take a boat and she will tell you: ‘I’m sure I will pay for you the boat but first, you need to stay with me this time and do this and do these things’. You know, it’s like something I can tell, like, almost a slave. They use you like slave.”

### ***“By smart way”: subtle forms of coercion***

None of the migrant men’s narratives revealed any overt physical coercion during these sexual advances as also Umran accounted: “I saw it, but to be honest, it’s not by force. He tells you, but by good way, by smart way. [...] he takes you to his house to take a shower, everything, but [you] must do the point [sex].”

The “smart way” – as Umran uttered – recurred in multiple narratives as a typical pattern: initial acts of kindness and support, offering to help with food, shelter, or taking a shower, eventually followed by subtle, seemingly minor demands like help with showering due to a sore

leg or massages. “First they help us, and after, they ask us to do like this”, Michael concluded, his words carrying a mix of confusion and quiet disbelief. Bisrat underscored how explicit propositions are “[...] not put [it] to you like a deal on the table, like ‘the rule is you have to have sex with me.’ It’s not like that. We are in 2024”. Rather, they unfold through ambiguous and often vague, manipulative gestures.

The pressing need for shelter was commonly perceived as marking someone an easy target for those seeking to take advantage. “The guys [migrant men], they just want to sleep, a place with no rain, not cold. And him, he knows that. He uses it,” Bisrat said. In this narrative, a male volunteer exploited migrants’ immediate need for shelter by offering a false promise of accommodation in a church-run migrant shelter in order to lure someone into his private home. Bisrat continued by recounting his story: “He uses a church, he tells you: ‘[...] there is the church that can help you. You can come take a shower, and maybe we’ll find a place for you to sleep. This is my phone number, call me.’ When you will contact him, he will ask you ‘ah, you can come my home. There is no place in the church’. You will come in the home, after he will ask you, you have to do that for me.”. Without ever naming the act explicitly, Bisrat concludes: “It’s like really bad things. I don’t like it”. Although concealed, Latif, a man from Yemen, immediately sensed the sexual intentions behind the way someone<sup>4</sup> approached him in Brussels: “They don’t ask you directly [to have sex] but [they] invite you to sleep at their house and eat [...] but from their body language, you know what they want from you”.

The typical, recurring dynamic of initial gestures of support eventually followed by sexual demands took on an added dimension in some narratives, where a gradual build-up of dependency through repeated, seemingly generous gestures became evident. “They will see which way you like,” begins Bisrat, describing a dynamic he observed with one of the female workers in his temporary shelter: “If you are someone that smokes, they will give you first a cigarette. On the second day, also a cigarette. After, they will give you a box. Like that, you will wait for her

every day to give you a cigarette [...] and after, she will ask you something. You cannot say no, because you know it’s only her who gives you the cigarette. [...] For example, if she asks him for sex, and she gave him a cigarette for one month.”

Invitations to drink, use substances, dance, and party together – “you know, something like let you think of [sex]”, a young man from Eritrea told us – were described as facilitating sexual interactions, blurring or compromising the boundaries of sexual consent. Similarly, Bisrat recounted a recent conversation with close friends who had recently arrived in the UK, during which they exchanged anecdotes about their past experiences in a Belgian host family: “[They said like:] ‘She was crazy. She drank all night and asked me to drink. She asked me to dance.’ And then someone else tells, ‘Even for me, she did the same.’ Then they say, ‘Okay... and did you sleep with her?’ ‘Yeah,’ they said. ‘Ah yes, me too,’ [others added].” This quote sadly highlights how sexual interactions were a recurring, almost normalized experience within that particular host family. Adding further nuance, one participant noted that “it is sometimes the guys [migrant men] that they force [...] that the guy [migrant men] is drunk and they push the families also”, suggesting that intoxication could override consent.

### ***Sex, survival, and care***

Beyond the monetary, material and sexual aspects, the narratives also highlight deeper emotional dimensions of the sexual encounters the men in our study engaged in. Continuing the story his friend had recently shared, Filemon explained: “[...] we spend the weekend together, she buys me this or that, takes me to a restaurant, pays for my internet, for example. I have something, you see? [...] I am fulfilled, I am someone, she’s taking care of me.” Affirming his social and emotional worth as a person, Filemon’s words highlight how such encounters were often not limited to the sexual act itself but also offered a temporary mental and physical escape from stressful circumstances. At the same time, they responded to deeper needs for human recognition, intimacy, and care that surfaced in many men’s narratives.

Many of the reported sexual advances came from local, older, single women – or as often referred to as “mamas” –, living alone and themselves experiencing a form of social isolation and loneliness. Conversely, our fieldwork observations showed that hosts affectionately referred to the migrants they accommodated as *amigrants* – a neologism derived from the French *amis* (“friends”) – signaling the affective and relational dimensions that shaped these hosting relationships. In these settings, the act of offering shelter – often materialized as a room in one’s home – can blur into companionship, and at times, intimacy and sex, temporarily easing the weight of emotional hardship for both parties. The story of Umran poignantly illustrates this: “At that time [...] it was really bullshit in the squat and you don’t have anything. No help, nothing. I was really [in a] bad situation. And I met this woman. ‘So, why don’t you stay with me here’, she said, ‘I’m alone and I feel lonely and you can sit with me. Don’t think about the rent, everything. Just sit with me’”. While the quote primarily highlights the offer of shelter and companionship, Umran later disclosed that they occasionally had sex and briefly engaged in a relationship.

This emotional dimension of a sexual encounter was made explicit in the story of Moussa, a young man of Eritrean descent. He described meeting a woman on the street in Brussels during a moment of sadness: “I was feeling sad, and on the road back home I met [name]. She said to me: ‘Let your pain to me’. I went with her, and I spent the whole night with her. We had sex.” While the woman’s invitation suggested an offer of emotional care rather than a sexual proposition, the boundaries between emotional and sexual intimacy appeared to blur. “Spending the whole night” with her points also to a form of fleeting companionship that extends beyond the purely physical act of sex.

### ***Navigating desire, consent and coercion***

Framed as a “natural masculine need”, many of the men in our study expressed a desire for intimacy and to have sex. However, they emphasized that these encounters should occur within

the context of a marriage, a serious relationship, or motivated by love or a mutual emotional connection, “[...] and not only for body”. “There should be a feeling, something [else] between us, not only sex”, explains Youssef, a Sudanese man.

Men’s responses to sexual advances and propositions – whether real or hypothetical – varied, revealing different ways in which they exercised agency. As Bisrat, from Eritrea, explains: “If she tells me, ‘you will sleep outside tonight or you’ll have sex with me’, someone will choose to have the sex, and someone will say, ‘I will go outside’ [...] But it’s forced, because if not, he will sleep outside”.

Some described blunt refusals, grounding their rejection in religious beliefs or cultural traditions prohibiting sexual encounters before marriage. Others reported self-defensive responses, ranging from physical confrontation to deterrence and retaliation. Referring to the man roaming the streets of Calais, Omar from Sudan suggested: “These days he is not here. I think somebody threw a stone at him or something”. Given that sexual propositions in the sample originated from both men and women, reactions were strongly influenced by the gender of the person making the proposition. Since all participants self-identified as heterosexual and most expressed disapproval of same-sex interactions, propositions from men were deemed beyond consideration. One participant even remarked: “I would rather die than do it with him”. In contrast, having internalized expectations of constant male sexual readiness or, for some, a genuine longing for sexual intimacy, propositions from women were viewed more favorably: “If it’s a woman, maybe I’ll accept it directly... even if she’s anything, I will accept”. Further, the men in our study were more inclined to agree to encounters with women closer to them in age: “If it would happen to me, a woman and she is old, I would not agree. But if she is not very old in age, even though she is older than me by five years, she is acceptable for me”.

Few others stated to accept the transactional offer regardless of the partner’s characteristics. “Sometimes the situation can’t let you think”, narrated Umran from Eritrea. “If you don’t have money, if you don’t have anything, what to do?”,

he continued. Referring to the systemic pressures of daily survival – manifested in the lack of shelter, food, and safety – some men argued that sexual propositions from either men or women felt effectively forced upon them. Powerfully illustrating the complex entanglement of coercion and consent within these dynamics, one participant explained: “You do it and you are accepting, but it is forced, you are forced to do it. It means, you do not want, but you do it, you still do it”. Complicating straightforward notions of consent, another participant further highlighted the ambiguity in men’s responses: “Sometimes also I see it like, it’s them, the guys [migrant men], they choose, they are okay with that to do it. And me, I say it’s good, but sometimes also it’s bad. But all the time, it’s like, they attack the same people, and that’s it.”

Equally constituting agency, few men in our study deliberately avoided contact with women, responded with suspicion and caution when being approached or drastically reduced their presence in situations that would potentially invoke being sexually targeted. This pattern became particularly evident in the second interviews, with participants who had arrived in the United Kingdom sharing numerous stories of their migrant peers inadvertently being accused and legally pursued of sexual harassment when dating British women. Although in contrast with his masculinity and his wish to connection, Samir, a Sudanese man explained that he feared being accused in the same way: “Here [in the UK], I’m scared. If a woman tries to talk to me, you know, I’m scared. I’m thinking, what does she want? Even I’m [a] man, right? But I’m thinking, what do you do? Maybe she will do something to me. And I try to be careful.”

### ***She has the right: gendered understandings of sexual consent and vulnerability***

Our narratives revealed that understandings of sexual consent are shaped along gendered and racial lines. Bisrat explained “the rules of the sex” from his point of view: “the woman and the guy is not the same [...] She has to say yes, yes, yes. Like 100%, with no afraid, with no pushing. If you check the rules like I have it at the school, it’s like

all for the women”. Positioning women’s consent as central – sometimes even the only one that matters – this rationale assumes men are driven by uncontrollable sexual urges, making them incapable of, or exempt from, giving consent. One participant articulated this perspective metaphorically: “But the man, he cannot control himself [...] all the time we say, ‘a man is like a dog’. When you hold the meat to the dog, he will just come behind you”. It also renders men supposedly invulnerable to sexual victimization, as the quote of Abdo, a young Sudanese man exemplifies: “There is not, you don’t have girls that rape a man (laughs). Impossible. [...] As a man you like, you like more. You like women, you know”.

Apart from these gendered presumptions and its implications for vulnerability and credibility upon coercion, the demonization of migrant men, their precarious legal status, and their unfamiliarity with the new country they are in, further deepen the unequal power dynamics that shape such asymmetric sexual encounters. According to Bisrat, a migrant man that seeks support after experiencing an unwanted sexual encounter would be a lost cause: “You know, she can use a lot of things because she speaks the language more than you, she can do a lot of things, and she will have the right also”.

One man noted that having had sex could become an additional factor deepening dependency and power imbalance, as it gave the other party – in this case, a woman – potential leverage over the migrant man: “After a first sex, she can use [it] like: ‘Okay, I will say this or that if you don’t do what I ask, because you already had sex with me.’ Or she will go to the police and say you came to her home and so on”. In such a scenario, “if we make any court, she will win”, he concluded. Abdo made a similar point about the presumed credibility of local, white women over migrant men: “The police, he will, he will believe [the girl] because this girl is British girl. I’m a refugee. Of course, he will believe who? Her, right? And she is [a] woman.”

None of the men in this study filed a complaint or sought support following these experiences. As one man explained, “The guys [migrant men], they decide now [...] to keep it silent and finish and to leave the country. They leave the country [...] because of a lot of things like that

happening”. By the time of the study’s second interview phase, many participants had relocated to other parts of the country or had continued their migration journeys elsewhere, resulting in a cessation of contact with the sexual partners described in their narratives.

## Discussion

Previous studies have documented the sexual vulnerability of displaced men and boys, demonstrating their increased likelihood of acquiring and transmitting STIs (Evans et al., 2011), heightened risk of experiencing sexual victimization during and after migration trajectories (Belanteri et al., 2020; De Schrijver et al., 2022; Keygnaert, Vettenburg, et al., 2014; Linthout et al., 2025), and the frequent dismissal of their sexual rights more broadly (Baroudi et al., 2021). Our study adds and expands to this body of work by showing how sexual encounters of self-identified heterosexual migrant men who are in transit entangle intimacy, survival, coercion, and care within unequal power relations shaped by racial hierarchies and the material, legal, and social precarity that characterizes their lives. These encounters are therefore deeply ambivalent: they are neither wholly consensual nor overtly coercive.

The sexual encounters analyzed in this paper unfolded across diverse contexts, involved different ‘types’ of sexual partners, and were situated within various forms of ‘relationships’. Yet, amid this heterogeneity, the persistent lack of stable accommodation and the material precarity characterizing the men’s lives created conditions of dependency that allowed transactional dynamics to permeate and shape their sexual interactions.

Whereas sexual acts in sex work are typically consensual, negotiated, explicit, and immediately remunerated (Stoebenau et al., 2016), transactional sex differs in that the exchange – such as shelter, food, or help with paying for a boat to cross to the UK in our study – is often implicit, may occur before or after the sexual act with no defined timeframe, and is not necessarily directly tied to sex (Gilbert & Selikow, 2011). In these relationships, the exchange of sexual activities for material or non-material benefits may not always be disclosed or even recognized as such (Heidari et al., 2024), rather they occur alongside each

other, with emotional, sexual, and material or monetary favors often becoming intertwined and inseparable (Groes-Green, 2014). Yet, when these interactions take place amid relationships of dependency, feelings of indebtedness toward someone who has offered support, extremely precarious living conditions, and broader societal exclusion and dehumanization of migrant men, the presumption of genuine consent and equal negotiation – the “fundamental points of distinction in respect to transactional sex” (Westendorf & Searle, 2017, p. 371) – becomes ambiguous and difficult to evaluate (Spencer, 2005).

Further complicating straightforward distinctions between consent and coercion in our findings is the longing of some migrant men for recognition, companionship, and human connection. Migrants are known to face disproportionately high levels of loneliness, a risk amplified for those traveling without partners or family – as was true for nearly all men in our study – which in turn is linked to poorer mental health (Devos et al., 2025). When citizens welcome migrants into their homes and everyday family life, private hospitality becomes grounded in emotional bonds and can create an intimate environment in which close, family-like cohabitation may give rise to genuine feelings of affection, attraction, or even love (Monforte et al., 2021). Such feelings are intelligible and deeply human, and they are not inherently negated by existing power imbalances. Overlooking them would disregard the complexity of social relationships, especially when people live closely together (Westendorf, 2023). When the fulfillment of emotional needs, the search for companionship, or the development of friendships however becomes directly or indirectly intertwined with sexual expectations, advances, or pressures, the boundaries of consent may blur, with sex potentially emerging as a by-product of seeking closeness or emotional relief. Situated within intimate and moral grey zones, the collapsing boundaries between friendship, love, companionship, patronage, and sex work can be defined as – what (Groes & Fernandez, 2018, p. 17) call – “in-between practices”. Grounded in the uncertainty of an unresolved asylum application or the intention to continue their journeys and eventually leave the country, migrant men’s

presence – and thus their sexual availability – is constrained in time and space, transforming sexualized interactions into *fugitive encounters*: ephemeral, disposable, and unaccountable.

In a society that increasingly vilifies migrant men, being welcomed into someone's home and recognized as an individual can have a deeply humanizing effect (Behrendt et al., 2025). Paradoxically, however, when implicit or explicit pressures to engage in sexual encounters arise within these settings, the very same relationships can reproduce dehumanizing dynamics: migrant men may be recast as temporary objects of pleasure, desired for the moment yet not imagined as partners in sustained, long-term intimacy (Ingvars, 2023). In this way, they become humanized through the recognition and care offered in hosting relationships, yet simultaneously dehumanized through sexual objectification, denied full acknowledgment as autonomous men, or even as fully human (Ingvars, 2023).

Power became persistently salient in sexual partners' privileged access to support, most visibly illustrated in sexual encounters involving aid workers, volunteers, and local citizens. By virtue of their professional or voluntary roles in humanitarian work, these individuals are responsible for the care and protection of migrant men and provided, controlled, or mediated access to essential services, including shelter. Humanitarian settings are particularly vulnerable to abuses of power, as – amid the growing absence of governmental support for migrants who irregularly reach the European mainland – they are often characterized by material deprivation and dependence on aid organizations for basic survival (Westendorf et al., 2024). The UN defines sexual exploitation as “any actual or attempted abuse of a position of vulnerability, differential power, or trust, for sexual purposes, including, but not limited to, profiting monetarily, socially or politically from the sexual exploitation of another” (UNSG, 2003, p. 1). This includes situations in which individuals exert control over access to essential resources and demand sexual favors in exchange for shelter, employment, food, money, or other means of survival, as was evident in our findings. Although disproportionately affecting women and girls, the sexual exploitation

and abuse of men and boys by humanitarian aid workers and peacekeepers have been documented in several conflict and post-conflict contexts (Holt & Hughes, 2007; Kolbe, 2015; Njoku et al., 2022; UNSG, 2002). In the latter, entrenched power hierarchies within camps for internally displaced people enable humanitarian workers and security personnel to exploit their control over essential resources, coercing men and boys into sex-for-food/money (Njoku et al., 2022). Likewise, during displacement and transit, individuals in authority such as soldiers, police officers, chairmen, and smuggling guides, including those meant to protect migrants, were often among the perpetrators of sexual violence against them (Araujo et al., 2019; De Schrijver et al., 2022; Keygnaert, Vettenburg, et al., 2014; Orsini et al., 2022).

As our results suggest, the coexistence of migrant populations experiencing precarious legal, social, and material conditions, alongside a network of NGOs and volunteers operating in response to these vulnerabilities, renders our fieldwork sites, Brussels and Calais, similarly conducive to the emergence of sexual exploitation of migrants by aid providers. We regard these dynamics as deeply problematic, as they involve professionals – bound by codes of conduct<sup>5</sup> and humanitarian principles – exploiting their position of power and privileged access to resources vis-à-vis those whom they are mandated to assist. These incidents may inflict serious harm on the individuals involved and paradoxically reproduce and deepen the very vulnerabilities that prompted humanitarian intervention in the first place (Westendorf et al., 2024).

Reproducing a humanitarian framework of engagement (Malkki, 2015), citizens' initiatives to host migrants in the intimate, private sphere of their homes enact forms of private hospitality that inherently rest on unequal yet dynamic and contested power relations (Derrida, 2005). The host – as the homeowner and thus with greater material and financial resources – retains the authority to decide who is welcomed, the duration of their stay, and under which conditions (Rozakou, 2012). In line with the trope of the isolated, lonely and vulnerable refugee in need of support of others (Ticktin, 2011), hosting families in France, Italy, and Britain enacted an “affective

responsibility” toward their migrant guests: articulating their hospitality mainly through emotions of affection and care (Monforte et al., 2021). In line with earlier studies (Merikoski, 2019; Monforte et al., 2021), the use of family-like language – particularly the tendency to refer to the host as ‘*mama*’ – reflects this affective dynamic. The invocation of motherhood may soften or obscure the power asymmetries at play in these relationships and, in turn, complicate the moral judgment of the sexual interactions that occur within them. However, at the same time, when sexualized encounters arise in this dynamic, the maternal framing becomes deeply incongruous, exposing the contradiction between the moral expectations of familial affection, and maternal care in particular, and the structural inequalities that necessitate hosting in the first place. Solidaristic acts can also generate implicit – though often unspoken – expectations of reciprocity (Derrida, 2005). While in Monforte and colleagues’ study (2021) this reciprocity took the form of expecting migrants to demonstrate themselves as emotionally responsive subjects who could ‘love in return’, our findings suggest that such expectations may also extend into the sexual realm. The altruistic gesture of hosting migrants in one’s home can cast a veneer of innocence over sexual encounters, obscuring the transactional dynamics that accompany them. Within this dynamic, sexual consent may be downplayed, taken for granted, or rendered negligible. From the migrant guest’s perspective, the indebtedness produced through being sheltered during moments of acute hardship may similarly condition their responses, transforming what appears voluntary into an act shaped by gratitude, perceived debt, or fear of losing support.

Sexual targeting by white European men and women was sometimes read as a manifestation of eroticized fantasies that draw on deep-rooted colonial and postcolonial imaginaries of Black masculinity and sexuality (Yurdakul & Korteweg, 2021). To uphold the hegemony of white patriarchal masculinity, colonial discourse portrayed dark-skinned men as more beast than human (Lugones, 2010). Casting Black men as “animal-like” enabled their sexuality to be imagined as excessively promiscuous and uncontrollable,

supposedly driven by overpowering urges and thus positioned as inherently dangerous, especially to white women (Ogungbure, 2018). This colonial imaginary produces what Mohanram (2007, p. 82) calls “white desire”: a paradoxical dynamic in which white subjects seek to maintain moral and racial superiority by excluding racialized bodies from full participation in white hierarchies, while simultaneously cultivating erotic fantasies about these imagined, “out-of-time” bodies. The pursuit of “satisfying white appetites and desires” (Ogungbure, 2018, p. 3), alongside the enactment of racialized erotic fantasies, appears to have shaped the sexual targeting directed at some Black migrant men in our study. Grounded in a long history of racism and slavery and perpetuated by colonial and post-slavery racial hierarchies, these experiences reflect the fetishization, consumption, and sexual objectification of Black bodies (Ogungbure, 2018).

Finally, our findings unsettle hegemonic understandings of gender and sexuality, which operate as intersecting systems of power that silence men about the ambiguity of their sexual encounters. Drawing on hegemonic masculinity (Connell & Messerschmidt, 2005), men are assumed to be the initiators of sex: always willing, always available, and therefore “perpetually” consenting to sex. This reading of masculinity, which many of our participants appeared to have internalized and sought to embody, constructs men as invulnerable to sexual coercion and renders sexual refusal incompatible with manhood (Connell & Messerschmidt, 2005). Yet, in our data, women frequently appeared among those initiating or expecting sexual encounters, contradicting dominant masculine ideals and complicating men’s interpretations of these interactions. This, in turn, may have contributed to men’s hesitant, at times euphemistic and shame-filled ways of discussing these experiences, as well as their reluctance to label them as sexual violence or exploitation, or to see themselves as victims. These hesitations and euphemisms may also reflect moral and religious frameworks within which many participants were socialized. For men who self-identify as heterosexual, engaging in or even being associated with same-sex sexual contact may threaten their gendered and sexual

identity, particularly within cultural contexts where masculinity is tightly bound to heterosexual dominance and moral respectability (Connell & Messerschmidt, 2005). Silence and moral distancing might hereby serve to manage stigma and protect one's masculine identity. Survival-driven sexual encounters thus unfold not only within structural power imbalances but also within moral regimes that render certain acts unspeakable, further complicating how consent, agency, and victimization are understood, narrated, and lived. Finally, these moral and gendered dynamics are further compounded by racialized regimes of suspicion whereby racialized migrant men are widely portrayed as "perpetual suspects" of violence, particularly toward white women (Long, 2021), further delegitimizing their accounts when the dynamics of coercion are inverted. This disbelief reinforces the power of those who opportunistically exploit them, as it silences men's experiences and prevents them from seeking recognition or support.

### Recommendations

Our findings illustrate that migrant men's vulnerability to sexual targeting is not inherent but produced through structural conditions such as their legal precarity, unstable accommodation, material deprivation, and unequal power relations. Mitigating these factors, structurally produced through governmental migration management policies, is essential for reducing migrant men's exposure to the ambiguous and coercive sexual dynamics documented in this paper. A thorough critical assessment of current migration policies – most notably the scarcity of safe and legal pathways across European borders – and their effects on the intimate lives of people seeking protection is central to moving toward structural interventions that meaningfully reduce migrants' vulnerability to coercive and exploitative sexual dynamics. For those who applied for asylum in a European country, guaranteeing timely, safe, and unconditional accommodation for all, including adult single men, would reduce reliance on ad hoc support and thereby limit the conditions of dependency in which coercive or ambiguous sexual dynamics can arise. Further, without criminalizing

acts of solidarity, we plead for creating greater awareness among humanitarian workers, volunteers and citizens of the ambiguities and grey zones between consent and coercion that can arise in caregiving relationships. Finally, independent and confidential reporting mechanisms should be established to enable migrants, aid workers, and citizens to anonymously report abuses of power, including sexual exploitation, in humanitarian settings and to connect them with accessible legal, psychosocial, and medical support.

### Conclusion

Our study demonstrates that the sexual encounters of migrant men occur in intimate grey zones where (desire for) intimacy, survival, and care are tightly interwoven. Hence, they cannot be neatly categorized as either consensual or coercive. Whether emerging in everyday encounters while roaming the streets, in humanitarian settings shaped by relationships of dependency, in the fulfillment of emotional needs, or through the eroticized desire for the racialized "Other", the encounters described in this paper are marked by power imbalances rooted in racial hierarchies and in the material, legal, and social precarity that structures the lives of men during onward migration journeys. Dependency, the uncertainty and temporariness of their stay, and hegemonic understandings of gender, sexuality, and race collectively obscure migrant men's vulnerability to coercion and mute the ambiguities embedded in their sexual experiences. Recognizing these dynamics challenges dominant stereotypes that portray migrant men as sexual predators and calls for more nuanced policy, practice, and scholarly engagements with migrants' sexual lives.

### Notes

1. Single, here, refers not to their relationship status, yet to the fact they undertake their migration journeys on their own.
2. Coinciding with our fieldwork, October 2022 marked the beginning of a prolonged national reception crisis in Belgium that continues at the time of writing (November 2025). Adult, single male applicants for international protection are denied accommodation

following their asylum request and are left without support.

3. Gender was not mentioned in the original narrative
4. Gender was not mentioned in the original narrative
5. The Six Core Principles on Protection from Sexual Exploitation and Abuse (PSEA), issued by the Inter-Agency Standing Committee (IASC), constitute the most widely adopted standards across UN agencies and humanitarian NGOs. They prohibit sexual exploitation and abuse; sexual activity with minors; the exchange of money, employment, goods, or services for sex; and any sexual relationship grounded in unequal power dynamics. The Principles also establish mandatory reporting obligations and accountability mechanisms for violations.

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## Author contributions

CRedit: **Leni Linthout**: Conceptualization, Formal analysis, Funding acquisition, Investigation, Methodology, Project administration, Writing – original draft; **Ilse Derluyn**: Conceptualization, Formal analysis, Supervision, Validation, Writing – review & editing; **Caroline Desombre**: Conceptualization, Formal analysis, Supervision, Validation, Writing – review & editing; **Massil Benbouriche**: Conceptualization, Formal analysis, Supervision, Validation, Writing – review & editing; **Ines Keynaert**: Conceptualization, Formal analysis, Supervision, Validation, Writing – review & editing.

## Ethical approval and informed consent statements

Ethical clearance for the study was obtained from the University of Lille, France, with reference 2022-601-S105 and the Commission for Medical Ethics of Ghent University Hospital, Belgium, with reference ONZ-2022-0082

## AI use disclosure statement

Generative AI tools were used in the preparation of this manuscript in accordance with the Taylor & Francis AI Policy. Specifically, ChatGPT (OpenAI, version 5.1) was used to assist with grammatical refinement and improving the flow of sentences originally written by the authors. All

substantive intellectual content, analysis, interpretations, and conclusions are entirely the authors' own.

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## Data availability statement

Due to privacy and confidentiality considerations, the data underlying this manuscript is not publicly available.

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