

Time and Friendship in the Corona Pandemic: Relationship-Making Between Middle-Class Migrant Women in Norway

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Abstract: The pandemic's rupture in people's lives was felt in a particular way among foreign-born middle-class women in Trondheim. In the situation of unexpected (im)mobility and anxieties related to the pandemic, the lack of close relationships in the local context, was significantly felt. Despite digital acceleration, that was witnessed with pandemic, it highlighted the centrality of local presence and physicality of relations. The pandemic created a situation in which women realised the importance of having friends in the local community to cope with the restrictions and triggered a necessity for the otherwise highly mobile individuals to establish new relationships and explore the local environment. In this article, I discuss the formation of such relationships and the role of social media platforms, more specifically the role of a local social media-based initiative for mobile women with diverse cultural backgrounds. I argue that 'affective time' of pandemic created temporalities for forming a community for sharing sufferings, security, and joyful distractions from the crisis. This article considers meaning and experiences of friendship under condition of uncertainty and how relationship-making shape migrant's woman engagement with the present. I follow a methodology of friendship, developed by Tillmann-Healy (2003), as a useful tool to research friendship-making practices and specifically in times of crisis.

Keywords: friendship, time, pandemic, crisis, affective time, temporalities, (im)mobility, migration, digital anthropology

The pandemic's rupture in people's lives was felt in a particular way among foreign-born middle-class women in Trondheim with diverse cultural backgrounds. They experienced isolation and anxiety when being stuck alone in their homes during lockdowns. Prior to the pandemic, they had to a large extent kept in contact with friends

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and family through traveling and digital social platforms, but now felt a sudden need for interaction and shared experiences in the “real world”. Long distant friends and relatives, with whom they could keep in contact exclusively through digital media, were not sufficient to cope with the uncertainties and loneliness brought about by the infection control measures. The pandemic created a situation in which they realised the importance of having friends in the local community to cope with the restrictions and triggered a necessity for the otherwise highly mobile individuals to establish new relationships and explore the local environment. In this article, I discuss the formation of such relationships and the role of social media platforms, more specifically the role of a local social media-based initiative for mobile women. I argue that the ‘affective time’ of the pandemic created temporalities for forming a community for sharing sufferings, security and joyful distractions from the crisis. Belonging to the community locally turned out to be significant for women to live through the pandemic. This article considers the meaning and experiences of friendship under conditions of uncertainty and how it shaped migrant women’s engagement with the present.

The article is based on 10 months of ethnographic field research among migrant² women in Trondheim, Norway, particularly middle-class³, mostly single women in their thirties who migrated alone and who are professional workers.⁴ They worked at the university, in private companies or were self-employed. Although they, in the view of the majority of the population, represent rather privileged and “welcomed” migrant workers (they are well-educated and multilingual, speaking English and Norwegian in addition to their mother tongues), almost all of them were employed on temporary contracts.⁵ Employers perceived them as part of an international, mobile and flexible labour force, and they may be seen as part of a global “precariat” unable to live and carry out livelihoods in consistent and sustainable ways (Standing 2011).

They come from various regions like the Middle East, Baltic Countries and Central Europe,⁶ representing ethnically and racially different groups. Prior to the pandemic,

² I acknowledge problems with the term ‘migrant’ that often can be used as a tool by different people and institutions to produce inequalities within society. In the article I use it as an analytical category and situate it among other social categories like class and race, to analyse different socio-economic positions of women. See the discussion on ‘immigrant integration research’ in the special issue of *Comparative Migration Studies* (2018), especially Schinkel (2018).

³ Class is understood as a cultural category which is defined by the different kinds of economic, cultural and social resources or ‘capitals’ (Bourdieu 1987) that people possess.

⁴ Definition of skilled workers depends more on how potential workers are viewed by interest groups like institutions, national and transnational politics, than on foreign-born workers characteristics.

⁵ The relationship between qualifications, policies and local labour market dynamics is central for defining the ‘wanted’ migrants who get privileged access to the labour market. Given that immigration policies differ significantly among each other, it is explicit that there is no common agreement on the definition of ‘high skills’ but shows rather constructed nature of that category (see: Cerna 2013; Hercog & Sandoz 2018; Torresan 2007).

⁶ My research follows regulations and requirements for data protection of the Norwegian Center for Research Data (NSD). Regarding issues of anonymity and confidentiality, all names and countries of origin of my research participants have been anonymised.

they led remarkably mobile lives. They travelled abroad on a regular basis due to transnational networks (visiting families and friends), work obligations (conferences, research stays, exhibitions), and tourism. As such, they represent a cosmopolitan type with competence to deal with divergent cultural experiences (Hannerz 1996: 103). However, their ability to produce, define and reclaim belonging and friendship was often circumscribed by their intersectional⁷ experience of distinct social categories. ‘Intersectionality of experience’, which is a term coined by legal scholar Kimberlé Crenshaw (1989), signifies that overlapping social categories such as class, race and gender, are valid to a specified individual or groups’ identity and create unique experiences that change social identities and social perceptions, and are linked with different relationships stereotypes. As such, it underscores the ‘multidimensionality’ of marginalized subjects’ lived experiences (Crenshaw 1989). In addition, I suggest that the intersection of different social categories influence how the women established and accessed networks. Women met through the local digital platform for mobile international women that one of them had initiated prior to the pandemic.

The study is embedded in women’s experiences and knowledge, chiefly based on how they are expressed to me personally in interviews and conversations. My own experiences, although not overtly represented, are situated within the women’s narratives described here for two reasons. Firstly, I share many of the experiences and feelings they expressed. Secondly, I share a similar position with some of the women, as a white, middle-class migrant employed at the university and who moved to Norway for educational and work opportunities. As such there is an embedded autoethnography⁸ in the article.

The article presents the story of friendship-making locally in Trondheim. Trondheim is the third largest city in Norway, with a population of 208 281 (SSB⁹). It is the home of higher education and research institutions like the Norwegian University of Science and Technology, and Sintef, the largest independent research organization in Scandinavia. These two institutions and affiliated high-tech industries attract many international students and skilled workers. The city is also the regional capital and an old pilgrimage destination that makes trade and the service industry the largest economic sector, followed by health and social services, and the educational sector. The fact that higher education and advanced technological industry are such important sectors also characterises the demography. The largest age groups are those between

⁷ Intersectional perspective emerged in feminist studies and critical race theory in the 1970s and 1980s (Beal 1970; hooks 1984; Crenshaw 1989).

The concept of interlocking characteristics as unique and inimitable from their components was proposed to identify the distinct oppression experienced by Black women that simultaneously diverged and converged with the disparagement of Black men and the oppression of White women (e.g. Crenshaw, 1989; hooks, 1984).

⁸ See other examples of research using methods of autoethnography and intersectionality in migration studies in Scandinavia (Lapina 2017; Lapina & Vertelytė 2020).

⁹ (<https://www.ssb.no/kommunefakta/trondheim> access: 3.06.2021)

20 and 35 years (SSB¹⁰), and the population of international migrants is very diverse in terms of country of origin, ethnicity, class and education. Migrations increased after the implementation of the free movement of labour in 2004 in the European Economic Area (EEA) and, today, migrants constitute 16,8% of the population, the vast majority of these born outside of Norway¹¹. The residential pattern of migrants in Trondheim shows with a few exceptions that migrants are fairly equally distributed in different townships, testifying to the cultural diversity of the international migrant population. Trondheim is located by a fjord at the mouth of a huge river and appeals with a beautiful natural setting with large numbers of recreational areas, mountain tops, skiing, cycling, and hiking trails. Its localisation invites to practise the outdoor lifestyle and for the women represented in this article, had an important role in the time of pandemic.

In the following, I discuss the concept of friendship in the time of the pandemic, and friendship as a method for ethnographic explorations. These discussions are followed by more substantial descriptions of the development of the digital social platform, which was so pivotal for the making of friendships during the pandemic, and the women's narratives of friendship before and during the pandemic.

Friendship in Affective Time

The concept of 'affective time' provides a useful tool for understanding the importance of friendship in times of crisis. 'Affective time' and 'vernacular timespace' are characterized by Bryant and Knight as 'a collective sense of living in an era that has a particular temporality with a set of ways to express experiences of that period' (2019: 194). There are two dimensions of such periods. One is the conditions that affect people collectively, like uncertainty, fear, depression, joy, intimacy. The other is how people individually experience such periods that are culturally defined temporal orientations, adequate to distinctive kinds of activity and thinking (Bryant and Knight 2019: 64). The pandemic brought a condition for a particular 'affective time' (Bryant and Knight 2019), which in turn affected friendship practices. The notions of loneliness, isolation, anxiety, but also support, care, closeness and reciprocity in encounters, gained a new meaning. Friendship-making practices, with their temporal rhythms and textures, dynamism and potential stagnation are expressed in our everyday life and in relation to the temporality of the pandemic.

Classification of friendship as an empirical and conceptual issue varies across time and space and has not been simple (Pahl 2000, Bell and Coleman 1999). Friendship

¹⁰ (<https://www.ssb.no/kommunefakta/trondheim> access: 3.06.2021)

¹¹ (<https://www.trondheim.kommune.no/globalassets/10-bilder-og-filer/10-byutvikling/byplankon-toret/statistikk/folkemengde-bakgrunnsland/personer-med-utenlandsk-landbakgrunn-etter-bakgrunns-land-2010-2021.pdf> access: 3.06.2020)

is a way of thinking about affective relationships which are part of the larger cluster of social and cultural practices. It embodies intersectionality of social, economic, and political statuses (Carrier 1999: 34–36). Social relations and friendship-making practices formed in the context of mobility are often different from those around relative stasis (Appadurai 1996, Urry 2000b, Amit 2007). People on the move might employ distinctive strategies for establishing and maintaining connection with their significant others (Conradson & Latham 2010; van Riemsdijk 2014). Recently, studies emphasize the ways in which migrants create local spaces and places of belonging and the salience of propinquity in terms of tangible support¹² (Morosanu 2013; Ryan 2007; Ryan 2015; Scott 2006a). Locally situated relationships can be important sources of emotional support, locally relevant knowledge, and sociality in the context of mobility and mitigate its challenges (Ryan 2007; Ryan 2015). The embedding practices vary by the category of migrant, but all migrants create a sense of local (dis)attachment through their everyday practices (Scott 2006a; van Riemsdijk 2014). This means that it is always situated practice and it constitutes situated knowledges (Haraway 1988), that should be analysed in their local and global contexts and dynamics. Additionally, web-based communities, often linked with maintenance of transnational ties, are increasingly used by migrants for different forms of local incorporation and facilitating local social relations and support (Plöger & Becker 2015). Social media platform for connecting migrant women in Trondheim, that I describe in the article, is part of that digital form of networking.

One of the difficulties is that researching friendship practices involves the observer being in the inner motivational and behavioural bases of interaction, and basing specifications of social norms on the latter is a challenge. To understand how friendship is formed, maintained, reproduced and changed, friendship thus becomes a useful methodological tool for research, as suggested by Tillmann-Healy (2003) and to which I now turn.

Friendship as a method

Tillmann-Healy's methodology of friendship takes into account four aspects (2003: 734). First, she highlights that friendship as a method is about 'radical reciprocity', a shift from 'studying them to studying us'. Here, practices like 'conversation, everyday involvement, compassion, giving and vulnerability' are essential (735). A second aspect is the pace of friendship that depends on whether 'the researcher and participants begin the study as strangers, acquaintances, friends, or close friends'. This influences the observational eye of the researcher and her analytical and critical approach (735).

¹² See the works on friendship making and social networks in the local environments in Scandinavian context (e.g. Povrzanović Frykman & Mozetič 2020; Povrzanović Frykman et al. 2019; van Riemsdijk 2010; van Riemsdijk 2014)

Third, the researcher has to follow the research participants in their lives in order to “situate research in the ‘natural’ everyday context of friendship” (735). This point also constitutes a significant question of this article: What is the ‘natural’ context of friendship for migrants and how did it change in the times of the pandemic? The fourth aspect is about ethics in research. The method of friendship requires ‘a stance of hope, caring, justice, even love where fieldwork relationships are as important as the project itself’ (735).

My positionality as a researcher and a white,¹³ highly educated, Polish, single woman, with a migration experience, impacted my research. Whiteness and other privileges can act as a blind spot that often prevents white people from seeing the realities of the lives of minoritized subjects (Kern 2005: 368). The complex relationships with women with different ethnic backgrounds being subjects of various racialized practices also allowed me to see many faces of intersectional oppression that they encounter in everyday life (Young 2000).¹⁴

When I received my PhD studentship in anthropology at NTNU and moved to Trondheim, I had secured a living, but had to look for social attachments. This experience was one of the reasons why I as a researcher turned to the notion of friendship and friendship-making practices. I find it an important aspect of life in mobility. Although I was interested in the aspects of social life of migrants in Trondheim before Corona started, with the development of the pandemic, I was feeling lonely and completely lost with the research. The fact that connection with women from the group developed and turned into friendship was related to our temporal situation. We shared similar positions as middle-class, single migrant women, facing difficulties of loneliness and anxiety related to the pandemic. The state of feeling vulnerable was an important bonding factor for us. I did not anticipate that I would write about the importance of local friendships in the time of crisis. Wherefore the group became an important source of support and joy for me and for other women, I decided to write about that phenomenon. Throughout the ten months of building trust and mutual commitment, my researcher and friendship roles blurred, each developing and deepening the other. My research participants became and remained my best friends and my substitute family. Therefore, since I use the ‘methodology of friendship’, which emphasizes a shift from studying ‘them’ to studying ‘us’ (Tillmann-Healy 2003: 735), I will use ‘we’ instead of ‘they’ to describe the situations I was part of.

Although friendship as a method intends to increase collaboration and greater interaction, I acknowledge the problems and risks related to the development of knowledge that takes place through friendship, such as power inequalities and participants’

¹³ ‘Whiteness’ is a concept in Norway that claims neutrality, non-racial universality while it should be read as a system of domination that is reproduced by its denial (see critics of conceptions within migration studies: Schinkel 2018).

¹⁴ Many times, I would hear from my research participants comments like: ‘but for you it is different’, ‘your position is different’, ‘they treat you different’ that would be related to my situated privilege.

sense of disappointment, alienation, and potential exploitation (Cotterill 1992; Hasstrup 1995:2–4; Kirsch 2005). Although doing anthropology at home, where ‘leaving your fieldwork’ is impossible, when coming back to the ‘everyday university-related duties’, it might give an impression of abandoning friends and limits possibilities of involvement. When it happens out of research context, I could just explain to my friends that I have a hectic time, related to work obligations. When friends are at the same time research participants, it might evoke a feeling of being exploited. It happened a few times where I had to explain why I was not there for my friends when I did focus on writing articles and limited my social life. It became difficult to control shifting balances of friendship needs and expectations. As such it evokes different ethical dimensions of power, control, vulnerability and related issues of caring. Moreover, mutuality and care as part of friendship practices, influenced me as a researcher doing anthropology *at home*, and made it challenging to distance myself from the observations of particular practices and experiences. For instance, it took me some time to give an honest account to the ethical challenges of friendship as a method.

Web-based sociality

Social media platforms can significantly change the organization of social networks and access to resources (Plöger and Becker 2015: 1528). It is important to also understand the influence of digital media technologies on the creation, maintenance and quality of personal relationships (Pink et al. 2016: 83). The affective practices of friendship that I describe did not develop just in face-to-face situations. The omnipresent digital technologies have deeply transformed the ways in which relationships are experienced and become significant in relation to networking, belonging and self-representation. The social media platform I refer to, is an example of an increasingly common mechanism for meeting other people at their actual place of living.¹⁵ It is a social media-based global and local platform for connecting migrant women. The initiative was created ten years ago by a woman who had moved many times due to her work and struggled with making friendships every time she arrived in a new place. The idea of the group is to create a friendly local community for women and non-binary people who live overseas or far from their home. The fact that women who make up the group would call themselves using terms ‘new generation of mobile women’, ‘internationals’, ‘expats’ or ‘ones living abroad’ with a strong emphasis on narratives of self-realization might be related to their common middle and upper-class background. Such terms are produced to distinguish groups of ‘privileged migrants’ from the term ‘migrant’ or ‘migrant worker’ which are terms often reserved for the low-income laborers who are often subjects of racializing practices and

¹⁵ For the sake of anonymity I don’t mention the real name of the group.

policies.¹⁶ In fact, all women in the local group are well educated and multilingual. The group is addressed to international women, who have limited options for friendship with the majority of members of the society where they live.

Trondheim's local branch of the platform was initiated in February 2020 prior to the pandemic, on social media platform. It was created by a woman who moved to Trondheim from North America to work at the university and wanted to find friends locally and feel at home. Until now, the group has 215 members from different ethnicities and nationalities. Although the group is relatively large, not everyone is active and usually up to 20 people participate in face to face meetings. The activities of the group were gradually affected by the different phases of the pandemic. At the beginning, all activities planned during the first meeting of the group in February were suspended due to the lockdown, and many people were in shock. There were no face-to-face events, but we met for a walk, maintaining social distancing. Then, in April, we met for an online coffee meeting, and I initiated the digital diaries. In May, after the first lockdown when everything started to open up again, we began meeting face to face, outdoors again.

I joined the platform from the beginning and participated in almost all meetings of the group. During a complete lockdown in April, I initiated the digital diaries and invited women from the group to share their thoughts and moments of life during the pandemic.¹⁷ The idea was to get to know each other better and share whatever we felt like: videos, photos, writing, poems, worries, moods. The diary online closed group had 7 members. It was not initiated as a tool for my research¹⁸(the idea of the diaries was to serve as a therapeutic tool, but we talked at the beginning that it might develop into some project). With the passing of time and during interviews, I realised that diary posts had an important role in creating relationships with other women, especially at the beginning of the pandemic. I asked for their consent to use their posts for my research and they all agreed on that. Now I turn to women's narratives on friendship before and during pandemic.

Friends and friendship before the pandemic

The measures imposed by the government to control the pandemic created the situation wherein women expressed feelings of isolation, often anxiety and loneliness. One

¹⁶ See the discussion on the politicization and racialization of the term 'expat' in different contexts (Farah 2020; Kunz 2020)

¹⁷ First, we circulated diaries written together with my close friends from Poland. It helped us to make sense of the chaotic world around us and share the conditions we were living in. Writing had a therapeutic dimension for us.

¹⁸ Technology has changed the significance of using diaries as a tool for social science research. It has been adopted as a method in various contexts, especially phenomena that are hard to research by the method of observation, for instance documenting discrimination incidents (Hyers 2018), breastfeeding practices (Williamson et al. 2012), the function of gossip (Waddington 2005).

of the explanations is that when a person migrates alone, such as the migrant women I refer to, they have to build a network of friends from scratch. Consequently, the initial feelings of solitude are common. Marie, a woman in her thirties and passionate about physics, moved from Central Europe to take up a two-year long postdoctoral position at the university, leaving her boyfriend Martin back in her country. Marie arrived in December, a month with few hours of daylight. For her first three months in Trondheim, until her first meeting of the web-based group, her social network was limited to her colleagues at work, with whom she never met outside working hours. During the interview in October, sitting in a park by the riverside downtown Trondheim, Marie reflected on that time just prior to the pandemic:

Like moving to Norway in the middle of the winter and you know no one and you don't have a lot of social interaction. So, the first moment was our group meeting where I remember it was my first weekend of social activity in Norway, so I was thrilled, I was over the top, the best day ever. So, I was so excited but I remember like before going to the meeting, I had a bit of thoughts, because I was like, I don't know if I feel comfortable meeting this big group of people that I don't know, you know, when you are like afraid, I'm not afraid of people, so you go. So, I was like 'you were complaining two days ago that you don't have any friends, so you have to go'.

In this passage, Marie reflects on a moment of happiness socializing with the other women in the group for the first time, but also on the hesitations that accompanied it. She had to push herself to go out and make friends. Her internal struggle with getting out and meeting new people and making friends implies affective labour. Affects that drive people to act and shape their thinking are 'spontaneous corporeal reactions to our environment and encounters' (Gutiérrez Rodríguez 2011; Massumi 2002). It relates to how people react to the feelings and energies of others. Marie's example shows that the emotional and social challenges of middle-class women migrants are comparable to other, less privileged migrants (Ryan 2011; Morosanu, 2013; Povrzanović Frykman and Öhlander 2018). Work environments might provide professional connections but not necessarily friendships and opportunities of socializing with others beyond work. Independently of their work positions, migrants might encounter challenges related to foreign language, socio-cultural norms or personal contacts.

Carla, originally from the Middle East, moved to Trondheim from North America to do a PhD in social sciences. Before moving to Norway, she had lived in three other countries. She has experience of living and working in multicultural environments. She tried for months to establish friendships at her workplace. She initiated a few events like an international food day, drinking mulled wine before Christmas, and invited people to her home. At that time, she was also busy with work and traveling for conferences. As a result, she had no time to make friends outside of work. After two years, and realizing she missed "real friends", she initiated the local branch of

the group for connecting migrant women. During an interview in her apartment in April, she explained her motivations:

For me, I think it took some time in Norway, to make friends, but also it's hard here, I think, the label is very tricky, because for me if I have a good relationship with someone and then invite them over and we talk, then I see them as friends but then I realized here there's still this notion of friendly colleague and friend. For me friends would be there is like you can easily talk to them, or if there is something, they will help you out or they will be there for you. But friendly colleagues, they're just really nice people but it's more about at the workplace and maybe not so much outside. So for me it was, I thought at some point I have really nice colleagues, but I don't have friends like the same notion as I have in other countries where I know these are my buddies and I can tell them anything and they will be there for me no matter what and they won't judge me. Then I went for a research stay to Finland. So through some people at work I got to know some other people, and they told me about this group and they invited me to one of the events, and immediately I felt like, oh, these are friends, it wasn't a friendly colleague, but it was friends. There is no hidden agenda, you're not being nice to them because you want to work with them or you need something from them, you're just there to have fun. I didn't have it the whole time I was in Norway.

Carla differentiates between 'friends' and 'friendly colleagues'. Her distinction suggests that ties formed through occupational networks at academia do not involve a large amount of time spent in ongoing interaction and might evoke less emotional intensity. Despite her endeavours, work does not appear to be a 'natural' context of close friendship (Tillmann-Healy 2003: 735). A "friend" implies, she suggests, a "buddy", a person she can tell "anything" to and will always "be there" for her "no matter what" and will not "judge her". In another conversation, she mentioned that she doesn't have a network outside of work and 'work is not the support network, there is much that you cannot share'. The notion of 'friendly colleagues' appears to imply that colleagues are friendly because they want to achieve something instrumental with their friendliness. She differentiates types of relationships that are direct from those where individuals are connected to each other in more than one context. This is what Gluckman called 'simplex' and 'multiplex' types of relationships (1955:19), where 'simplex' are relations specific in reference like 'kindergarten teacher', 'shop assistant' or 'academic employee'. By contrast, 'multiplex relationships' can describe situations where individuals are connected to each other in more than one context like 'neighbour' or 'friend'. In Carla's example, relations with co-workers would extend beyond the workplace into the more personal or intimate life contexts to transform 'simplex' into 'multiplex' relationships. However, there are limitations in multiplex relationships, as overlapping ties are not equal, and some might be valued differently in particular contexts. For example, some people would not value the workplace as a source of emotional support or perceive it as potential for producing conflicting interests.

Women who attended the very first meeting of a web-based group for connecting migrant women in February represented various cases and reasons for why they wanted new friends. Not all of them were newcomers in the city, and some of the women had already lived in Trondheim for a few years. Sofia's biography illustrates the complexity of sociality through the life-course as an interplay between the spatial and the temporal (Findlay and Stockdale 2003). She moved to Trondheim from Baltic Country five years ago as an exchange student. At that time, she had other student friends, but most of them left after they finished their studies. Sofia became pregnant with her Norwegian partner, whom she met in an informal volunteer group she was researching for her master thesis. She decided to stay in Norway. As a mother, she socialized with other international parents through kindergarten activities and her child's friends. Over time, some of these friends left for other countries because of new employment opportunities. Such spatial mobility is a characteristic feature of middle-class migrants whose work often involves time-limited projects (Amit 2007). Changing positions may imply detachment from limiting ties, both of place and of friendship. A later turning point in her life came from breaking up with her partner and becoming a single mother, with spare time every other weekend when her ex-partner takes care of the child. These life-changing events had significant consequences for her mobility and social network: it tied her to a place and triggered her to search for friendship relations. In this transformative period, she realized that she lacked friends, someone she could spend time with for the sake of mutual interests. Sofia's story shows the multidimensional nature of friendship ties and reasons to establish them. After living in Trondheim for five years, she was still looking for connections and joined the group. It is related to different stages in her life cycle and significance of changing social statuses, related to becoming a student, becoming a mother and then a single mother and unemployed. Her changing social relationships are related to the intersectional social structures she was a part of. In contrast, Carla, who did not have close friends because of limited time to develop them outside work, relates the absence of close friends to lack of employment and her changing of status to single mother. Both transitions influenced the types and dynamics of her social networks in Trondheim. During the interview, she emphasized the feeling of sameness with other women: "It's this international thing, then you felt like okay, you can have a weird name, you can be over 30 and you can still go and meet friends that no one is judging you because they are on the same boat." Her example emphasizes that migrant women might search for friends also on grounds of the dynamic of the network composition over time. Hence, belonging, which gives a sense of familiarity, security and the feeling of being in the right place, is a multi-layered and indefinite process. On a larger scale, it involves various intersections of social, cultural, economic and political categories (Yuval-Davies 2016). Dynamics of identification categories that continuously shift through the life course influence friendships relations.

Migrants are often perceived as prioritizing socializing and friend-making within communities of common origin. However, this may also be challenging as the situation of Nour from the Middle East shows. I met Nour at a concert with Persian music prior to the pandemic. We stood by a buffet and started talking about the concert. We immediately clicked and later, in May, I invited her to join the online group. Nour has lived in Norway for five years already. Due to relocations as an asylum seeker she had lived in three other places in Norway before coming to Trondheim for studies. She is a talented artist and is about to choose what to study. When I visited her in April, during the lockdown, she expressed disappointment with the community from her country of origin and felt very isolated and lonely, and disillusioned with living in Norway. Much later, during an interview in October, I inquired about these feelings:

In this mine society, it was because I'm totally different I have, I have my own thoughts. I don't give a fuck for religions or for what I say about these systems, this government. I'm not standing with anyone like, I'm not related to anything. And my people they don't respect people who don't relate to anything. You have to. So, they don't respect you. Not all of them... And the Norwegian people, always I can read from them, is that you are from Middle East, you are not from here, you're not Norwegian. So, I feel like being from two societies, I get like this, push me out from them. And I feel like 'why I'm feeling so lonely? I just want friends'. That's it. I don't want to have business or something with you I don't want from you to change your mind or to change my mind but just like to be friends.

One of the reasons why Nour fled the country alone, were the patriarchal cultural-religious norms limiting her in many areas of life. Now again, she feels trapped in exclusionary categories of belonging. She does not feel comfortable within neither the Norwegian nor the Middle Eastern community. From both sides she is perceived as a representative of an 'imagined community' (Anderson 1983), where her identity is understood as being based on a (myth) of common origin and combination of shared characteristics. People from her country do not give her much space to express her individual ways of being. She mentioned in another conversation that she tries to not care about it, but sometimes she feels pressure about 'norms how I should behave' (on belonging beyond dichotomies in Norway see: Jdid Mahmoud 2013). For Nour, ethnicity and national origin is less important than long-term engagement, shared experiences and affectivity. It confronts the role of ethnicity in migrant's friendships that should not be eagerly assumed (see Marcu 2012, Morosanu 2013). Norwegians, on the other hand, ascribe her to a minority, which may be related to, as recognized by the Norwegian anthropologist Marianne Gullestad (1984), that Norwegians struggle with egalitarianism where equality is codified as similarity, which means being and doing the same. She further states: 'In personal and informal relationships difference is easily codified as an unwanted hierarchy that repudiates the premises of having personal relationships' (1984: 85). Nour and other women research participants often recall stories about being racialized, often considered as 'inferior', 'strangers' or

bodies out of place (Ahmed 2004: 211), by the hegemonic normative subject. Sharing those stories contributed to bonding-processes between them; their relations and experiences of co-otherness became a source of empowerment.¹⁹ Such intersectional production of migrant's subjectivity can trigger differences of race, ethnicity, gender, class, among others, to inform the framing of integration discourses, which structure social, political and economic relations (Korteweg 2017: 433; Yuval-Davis 2006). Belonging thus is never a private feeling and is constructed by the ways in which migrants are valued and judged by others.

The examples discussed here illuminate the complex situation of migrant women and why having close friends cannot be taken for granted. The migrant women's biographies show that friendship practices are not static and can change along the life course or depend on the dynamics of the ethnic community one is part of, and how this community is perceived by representatives of the majority population. Different intersectional processes of categorization enable exclusion from social, political and economic institutions and practices and shape, among other things, interpersonal interactions (Korteweg 2017: 433). Wierzbicki (2004) argues that migration theorists are likely to take for granted that migrants arrive and easily blend into networks that provide them with jobs, resources, housing and emotional effort. As I have shown, this claim cannot be readily assumed for middle-class migrant women to Trondheim, and the web-based initiative is one of the responses to such a social situation of friendship-making that is characterized by porous boundaries and diverse dynamics.

Local explorations during the corona pandemic

The lockdown, introduced in Norway in March 2020, impacted the possibilities of friendship-making in the local context. The lockdown came two weeks after the women met in the first gathering of the social media platform, looking for connections and sharing many ideas for spending time together in the upcoming months.²⁰ At the initial phase of the pandemic, many of them faced a state of paralysis and anxieties related to forced physical isolation and uncertain futures. They struggled with navigating through significant lifestyle changes during the crisis, such as the impossibility to travel and being stuck alone at home. While trying to work from home, cope with studies or home-school and childcare responsibilities, they experienced loneliness in various ways.²¹

¹⁹ A discussion on racializing practices of representatives of Norwegian society and the strategies that women evolved to cope with it, is beyond the scope of this article and deserves separate attention.

²⁰ We made a list of suggestions on how we could actively spend time together which was posted in the social media group.

²¹ Loneliness is here analysed as an affective and subjective phenomenon, while social isolation is a physical and social reality. Both loneliness and social isolation are social, cultural and relational phenomena (Ozawa-de Silva and Parsons 2020: 614–615).

The 'affective time' of the pandemic triggered a sudden recognition of the meaninglessness of many things women previously valued. Such feelings arise when the future and the possibilities of one's expectations are torn (Bryant and Knight 2019: 71). The women used communication technologies to stay connected, communicate and create co-presence (Pink et al. 2016) with their friends and family members living abroad more intensively than prior to the pandemic. Although helpful at the beginning, those digital transnational communications and the emotions, sensations and intensities it involved, turned into fatigue. Channelling different emotions of uncertainties and care became overwhelming, with no local support network.

Because the possibilities to meet in person were limited, and after consulting the idea with other women, I initiated a platform for Women's Diaries, through which we shared various posts about day-to-day situations, thoughts and critical moments of life under the pandemic. The diaries had a function of getting to know each other better, updating each other about our struggles and other important issues. Sofia, for instance, who from the beginning of the pandemic was at home with her child and at the same time started a new job at the university, shared in the digital diaries thoughts about the reopening of kindergartens as an important turning point:

Today finally some important things became real – from Monday on a month long kindergarden closure will be over here in Trondheim. As for me, it synchronizes with and therefore also almost signifies the end of pandemic. Of course, it is far from over, but for me it means that I would go to shop without stressing about how many shelves my 3 year old will touch and without trying to keep our days structured and normal – without our regular structure which included kindergarden and friends visits, playdates, library, kids theatre and other human related activities. Needless to say, that my home office hasn't been very active place during these days, far less active than sourdough bread making, indoor gardening and kombucha making. I have enjoyed time with my kid and learned a lot about us during these weeks, but at the same time I have been waiting for our routine to come back, at least partly. And then, today it struck me that, as with many awaited things, once it is finally happening, it is kind of losing the importance (...). And now, what? Even though it is far from normal, I came to think how it will be after- because for me it is already a big step towards 'after'- what if the washing hands and keeping up with newest technology in order to be I touch with friends and family and work won't be enough? How will we feel after?

(post from 16th of April 2020 in the Women's Diaries)

In the diary post, she expresses liminal circumstances and worries about the future. When her daily routines were about to return, which meant among other things, having a divided day for work and childcare, she felt anxious, knowing that it is not 'the normal' as it used to be before the pandemic. Sofie, asking the question 'What will come after?', expressed a sense of a 'liminality of presence'; a 'threshold, moving toward the future but not yet there' (Bryant and Knight 2019: 36). Such circumstances define what Bryant and Knight call 'vernacular timespaces', like

a Time of Crisis, where the failure to anticipate is a significant way to define what creates the crisis (2019:23). Living in the liminal present or ‘threshold of anticipation’ (ibid.), created a condition in which the migrant women were reaching out to each other, sharing not only posts in digital diaries or walks. As a corollary of the crisis that forced women to stay in Norway, they connected with each other through exploring the locality together. During the nine months of group activity, ten group events were organized, mostly outdoor activities like hiking in the local mountains, exploring the city, dancing workshops on the beach, or picnics in the forests. There were also many other initiatives, not organized by the community, that women would share in the group, inviting others to join. The events were kept locally and brought many possibilities of meeting people and various settings of the city: an international cultural night, street food event, skiing activities, a horse-riding course, swimming, ceramic workshops, an African dance workshop, and online meditation and breathing practices. The natural environment of Trondheim with the possibilities it offered of outdoor and indoor activities, played an important role in the place-making and friendship-making practices.²² Beside activities structured by the web-based initiative, we met in each other’s houses and spent a few weekends in a cabin near Trondheim. We often shared meals from our places of origin, trying flavours from different parts of the world, and exchanged stories about our families, backgrounds, local traditions, politics and anxieties related to the pandemic. Marie told me in the interview that she learnt a lot about her new friends and the history of their places:

I remember telling Carla like ‘you never talk about Middle East’, and at one point she was starting to talk about the famous art craft from her region... She had those eyes like she was so proud of her culture and like sharing it. And I think she wouldn’t have been comfortable talking about it with everyone. Then we started talking about the history of our countries and I think, some time I feel so stupid because I don’t know, I feel, I realized, that I don’t know shit about other countries’ histories, maybe not much about my own. So, I’m like, oh, okay, but it’s so good to listen and to be like, oh, I feel actually less stupid, in a way, and also I’m learning about the backgrounds of my friends. I guess it increase tolerance like now I get where you come from, now I understand a little bit more about you and where you come from, and maybe why some stuff are triggering you on some topics or, the opposite like why you love so much something.

The possibility of sharing stories was for many of us a way to present our personal and collective history that otherwise, when living in Norway, not many people were interested in. The space of exchanging knowledge was important in the construction of friendship and community that influenced feelings of belonging which is, among other things, a narrative practice of ‘stories people tell themselves and others about who they are (and who they are not)’ (Yuval-Davis 2006: 202). In ‘telling these

²² Van Riemsdijk (2014) reaches a similar conclusion about belongingness and significance of the natural environment of Oslo contributing to the local sense of belonging for foreign-born IT specialists.

stories' women's sense of belonging embodied not only emotional attachments, but also feeling at home, familiarity and security in the time of crisis (Yuval-Davis 2006). Belonging can hence be both dialogical and performative (Yuval-Davis, Kannabiran, and Vieten 2006). The moments of togetherness were ways of escaping from the often overwhelming context of the crisis. An example of 'calling up things that are not present but exist elsewhere', which is a part of imagination (Ricoeur 1994) as a way of escaping from the world of the pandemic, was Sofie's idea of celebrating midsummer in Trondheim. Normally, she travelled every two or three months to her country of origin and was planning to celebrate midsummer there. Now it was impossible. Sofie suggested we celebrate it locally and as a result, we went to a cabin for a weekend. It was a warm, beautiful, sunny and calm day, and all of us wore white dresses. We were singing, drinking and picking colourful flowers for the wreaths. We even performed a wedding ritual as a part of the celebration. Later, we shared the photos with each other and on our Facebook profiles. Sofie was pleased that we took her idea seriously and performed it in our own way:

I think it was really nice that we had it at first different from others, it had its own terms like where we are. (...) I'm losing kind of expectation that everything gonna be the same. So I'm kind of just realizing it can be different but still connected so that brings me this happiness. It may feel good like we could not go to my country, and I realized that this Norwegian meadows and forests are actually, they are beautiful too and they're nearby.

She had the opportunity to experience midsummer locally, and although it was completely different than what she was used to in North Europe, it opened a possibility for other scenarios that can happen locally. It made her realize the potentiality in the local surroundings. A significant part of our explorations and a turning point in our relationship was a trip to Lofoten, an archipelago of beautiful islands in the northern part of Norway. Five women, after weeks of planning,²³ drove off in an old Volvo station wagon, fully packed with tents, dry food and warm sweaters. For each of us and for various reasons, the trip was a breakthrough in our friendships. For some of us, it was the first time camping and sleeping in a tent. Some had never travelled in a big group before. Every day we were exploring the beautiful beaches and blooming nature of Lofoten, facing simple struggles to find a spot for the tent with a good view and dry foundation, or how to escape from the rain. When the weather was more generous, we enjoyed cooking on the open fire and sitting there until morning, delighting in the midnight sun. We got to know each other from the most human situations like how we reacted to hunger, the cold, or how we express crankiness. Carla describes how she felt about the trip:

²³ We created a dedicated closed group on Facebook, where we would exchange links related to Lofoten, shopping lists and plans for the journey.

For me it's like that scenery that this girl trip, the *volvinka*,²⁴ the amazing scenes, that nature, this crazy cooking style we had that any food tasted good. Seriously. It was just magic. So, to be fair was just macaroni and cheese but it worked, and it was good like not making macaroni and then there's cooking on the small plate for five adult girls and somehow it did feed us in house. And it was like being in this dream place where you can put some things behind you and not going back again to the same old shit. I would still say it was like one of the greatest memories of my life it's something I will never forget. So, it was a lot of moments of escape and fun getting to know each other, being frustrated about coming back.

For the group, the trip to Lofoten was sort of a collective catharsis out of the pandemic and everyday problems. It relieved us from anxieties and allowed us to explore Norwegian nature together. The common experience, everyday challenges and adventures connected us as best friends who shared an experience that left a significant imprint on our lives. We started to refer to each other as 'Lofoten team' or 'Lofoten gang', and proudly shared stories of the journey with our work colleagues. We shared photos from the trip on our Instagram stories, profile pictures and private discs, and went back to them on colder and darker days with nostalgic memories of times of carelessness.

In the initial phase of the pandemic, the women living alone experienced anxiety and loneliness. We adapted to the 'new normality' in different ways: reaching out to friends and family abroad, engaging in creative activities or being completely cut off from any forms of social life. Our friendships were created and actualized from a need for connection. The situation pushed us to get out of our routines and forced us to make friends locally. The group for connecting migrant women became a platform that enabled us to explore the locality together which was an important healing practise during pandemic and act of forming a community where we could share sufferings, security, and joyful distractions from the crisis. This example also shows the importance of such social media platforms in finding local attachments and belonging. The affective time of the pandemic appeared as a 'natural context' for making friendships. The interpersonal encounters, along with the possibilities they bear, were an outcome of the situation of liminality and "stuckedness".

Temporalities of the pandemic

The path of building connections was richly charged with spontaneous moments of pleasurability, but also of mental health struggle, anxiety and sadness, which would not happen if the situation of the crisis had not forced women to stay in Trondheim

²⁴ A nickname for the car they were travelling with.

and relocate their activities. The conditions of being stuck triggered their imagination. Imagination, which I understand as a mental process and embodied practice that allows us to take a distance from the here-and now of the present moment (Cangia 2020: 699), and that can support people in adjusting symbolically and affectively to the liminal circumstances of the crisis (Zittoun and Gillespie 2016). The story from the first meeting after isolation with Marie and Carla, shows the characteristics of these temporalities. We met at Carla's apartment to share food and watch films. That was the first time any of us had met in someone's house, sitting in a group of three (at a safe distance), during the pandemic. Being very excited about the possibility of spending time together, we could not stop talking until late hours. We walked home with Marie at 3 a.m. When we talked later about that night, she recalls it with nostalgic excitement:

I felt so good. Getting out of my apartment and going to see friends and hanging out and having tea and talking. I think it was the first time I was actually seeing people in real life, in a really long time. It was in the middle of the week and actually right now I couldn't do that like I have to work tomorrow so I have to leave at midnight. But since we worked from home, it didn't matter that much, and you can start working at 11 and work later like that's completely fine. So, I guess it gave us that liberty in a sense like to not care about time because at that moment time didn't matter anymore.

This and other meetings provided a sense of how things ought to be. It reminded us about the simple, everyday delights and possibilities that disappeared during lockdown. In the context of the temporalities of the pandemic and development of friendships, orientations towards a future on the horizon but not yet here, were anchored in small situations like sharing food with friends or daydreaming about holidays. Through these elusive moments of everyday life, the vernacular timespace of the pandemic was laid bare; moments when 'we briefly become acutely aware of a futural trajectory through momentary thoughts and bodily reactions' (Bryant and Knight 2019: 197). Marie stressed the unusual sense of time during the pandemic. Normally, with a busy work schedule at the university, she could not enjoy long night gatherings in the middle of the week. Carla, during the interview in her apartment in November, explained what was special about building these new connections in the time of the pandemic:

It's the first time that we are actually really here, so we spend time to get to know each other and build these connections in this context that we are now kind of forced to be in. For me as I think I was always traveling a lot before, so I actually didn't really have time to go outside my workplace and make friends. [...] Also, many human beings I guess, we are all hit by the same crisis. And we bond in crisis. I think people bond in grief. And then sharing grief and they will say: 'sharing misery is half the misery'.

First, Carla mentions that being stuck in Trondheim and not having a possibility to travel abroad, created a condition of having time for making friends outside of

her work environment. Migration researchers focusing on middle-class and ‘skilled’ migrants often emphasize the short-term and disembedded nature of this type of migration, and, thus, ignore the fact that all migrants are somehow related to the locals through their everyday practices (Amit 2007; Escobar 2001). Here, we observe the story of normally mobile migrants that, due to pandemic restrictions, got locally attached through friendship practices. Although friendship is often seen as ‘spontaneous and unconstrained sentiment or affection’ (Carrier 1999: 21), the affective labour of building friendship requires regularities, emotional engagement and reciprocity which requires involvement. Carla mentions the sameness that women shared in facing the same crisis and loneliness, sharing a ‘misery’ that made room for building deep relations in a short period of time. In the ‘affective time’ of the pandemic each of us went through moments of mental health struggle and increasing sense of anxiety related to the pandemic and how it influenced our family members, situation in the country of origin or simply the feeling of meaninglessness. In the wintertime, two important people in my life died due to the pandemic, and I felt overwhelmed by the situation. In this time women from our group checked on me regularly and gave significant emotional support. They called me regularly and asked if I needed anything and showed that they were there if I needed help or talk. Reciprocity and care that we gave to each other in the difficult moments were crucial in bonding.

Nour also pointed out, in another context, the empowering potential of friendship and how it influenced her life:

My life totally changed like 70% or 80%. Because I feel like I meet people who have the same feeling like they don’t need to mix themselves with the people from the same country they come from and they don’t feel like themselves in this two cultures. As I feel myself, like we have maybe we are in the same level, so this is why we are together. And when you meet people that have the same situation as you have, you feel more comfort and more strong. And we are girls and we support each other.

For Nour, friendship separates different ‘others’ by establishing close relationships of intimacy and understanding among similar people. Women in the group are similar regarding their position as migrants, their education, aspirations, middle class position producing tastes for specific food or leisure pursuits which influenced their ‘pandemic experience’ and friendship practices. Their ‘lockdown experience’, including home office flexibility, is a reflection of class-based issues. The working-class migrants were much more exposed in public, working often in ‘close-contact professions’, even in the lockdown.²⁵ In this sense, friendship builds on, and gives a form to difference. In this case, narratives of friendship also express views on ethnic

²⁵ See: ‘Migrants and COVID-19 in Norway: Five Reflections on Skewed Impacts’ written by Marta Bivand Erdal, Hassan Aden, Ebba Tellander, Tatanya Ducran Valland, Kristin B. Sandvik and Kaja Borchgrevink (<https://blogs.prio.org/2020/04/migrants-and-covid-19-in-norway-five-reflections-on-skewed-impacts/> access: 10.01.2021)

differences between ‘autochthonous Norwegians’; members of her ethnic group and members of the group of close friends, the strangers (Ahmed 2000). It doesn’t mean that there are no differences between them as friends, but emphasises the aspects that made them similar as friends, i.e. as “co-others”. Such value has, for Nour, an empowering strength.

When lockdown was introduced, friendship became a helpful tool in counteracting anxieties and pressure, but also gave the ability to escape from the here-and-now of the affective time of crisis through various imaginative practices. The commonality of experience, ‘sharing a misery’, was something that gave them a feeling of safety in the circumstances of sharing vulnerabilities related to not having friends in town and facing isolation. If not for the pandemic restrictions, the women I am writing about and myself, would spend much more time travelling outside of Norway and participating in work-related events that would limit our possibilities of building local friendships. As much as our mobility and the particular jobs we perform is related to a middle-class position, it has influenced our experience of lockdown and patterns of sociability. That reflects the importance of intersectional framework also in research exposing the distribution of power and privilege of certain social categories in mobility experience.

Friendship and (im)mobility in times of crisis

Enforced stuckness and the temporalities of the pandemic deeply affected the middle-class migrant women in Trondheim. In the situation of unexpected (im)mobility and anxieties related to the pandemic, the lack of close relationships in the local context was significantly felt. Despite digital acceleration, which was witnessed with the pandemic, it highlighted the centrality of presence and physicality of relations. The initial role of the social media platform was crucial in connecting the middle-class migrant women, and emphasizes the importance of digitally mediated communities in forming local anchorage. The ‘affective time’ of the crisis, brought about an opportunity for the women to create and cultivate close relationships in the local context. As such, it highlights the importance of considering how critical events like the pandemic shape people’s temporal experiences of relatedness. Vulnerabilities related to forced immobility, crisis and loneliness influenced the ways friendship was established. The position of a middle-class migrant woman and experiencing the pandemic alone, created a situation in which women bonded very fast and supported each other. The article cast a light on the relationship between time and friendship questioning a linear relation between the two. The affective time of the pandemic and intersectionality of migrant women experiences prior to the pandemic reveal that friendship ties are fraught with disruption, disconnection, temporal ambivalence but also creation, bonding moments, proximity and relatedness. Categories like politics,

lifecycle, class background, race and time, among others, intertwine with each other and bring unique stories of (un)making relationships. Friendship in the local context brought a significant relief from anxiety and uncertainties, a sort of katharsis, while experiencing a ‘threshold of anticipation’ (Bryant and Knight 2019).

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