

Is a Woman a Better Refugee Than a Man? Gender Representations of Refugees in the Polish Public Debate

NATALIA BLOCH¹

ORCID: [0000-0002-1341-550X](https://orcid.org/0000-0002-1341-550X)

Institute of Anthropology and Ethnology, Adam Mickiewicz University

Abstract

Within the framework of global mobility regimes, some bodies are encouraged to move while others are pushed back. Nation-states create control mechanisms to block those who are “undesirable”. Apart from political utility, the colour of the bodies is indicated by the critics as the main criterion of division. However, one more important dimension that intersects with race here is the gender of these bodies. A woman fits the figure of an ideal victim better due to the nationalist patterns of femininity: she is vulnerable, submissive, and deprived of agency. Contrary to a man: his duty in the context of war is to remain in his homeland and fight for it. A man who does not do that, seeking asylum in Europe, is morally doubtful: he is a migrant posing a threat to “our” prosperity and security. This is how people crossing the Polish-Belarusian border are presented to public opinion and contrasted with female Ukrainian refugees. The article offers a critical analysis of gender representations of refugees in the Polish public debate through the prism of postcolonial theory, demonstrating that gendered and racialised colonial discourses underpin rationalisations about who has and who does not have a right to be a refugee.

Keywords: refugees in Poland, Polish-Belarusian border, gender, race, public debate

Introduction

In a contemporary world, marked by inequalities founded on the colonial past, not everyone has an equal right to be mobile. Global mobility regimes (Shamir 2005; Kosłowski 2011; Glick Schiller, Salazar 2013) encourage some bodies to move while

¹ Contact: nbloch@amu.edu.pl

pushing others back. Nation-states – but also supranational structures like the European Union or the United Nations – create various control mechanisms to filter, block, and confine those who are “undesirable” (Agier 2011). Such “selective empathy” (Cantat 2022) or “flexible solidarity” (Goździak, Main 2020) is the result of constructing the dichotomous figures of desired and unwanted refugees in the public discourses and nation-states’ policies (see e.g. Buchowski 2020). Apart from the issue of political utility², the colour of bodies – or rather the way in which bodies are racialised (Ahmed 2002) – is indicated by the critics of mobility and border regimes as the main criterion of division (Paré 2022). There is, however, one more important dimension that intersects with race here – the gender of these bodies. It explains why, in contemporary Poland, two distinct categories of refugees co-exist: those deserving and those undeserving of the receiving society’s empathy and international protection. White Ukrainian women, often accompanied by children, after the Russian full-scale invasion of their country on the 24th of February 2022, were welcomed enthusiastically by both the government and society and granted temporary protection that included access to the healthcare system, schools, and the job market. People from various Middle Eastern and African countries who have been trying to enter Poland from Belarus since August 2021, are chased by border guards and soldiers in the woods and pushed back through the fence made of steel spans with barbed wire that the Polish government constructed along the border to keep asylum-seekers away. The latter have been presented by the right-wing and public (i.e. government-funded) media mostly as male “illegal migrants”, although there are also women (including pregnant ones), children, and the elderly among them.

In this article, I ask the question of how the moral hierarchies of gender shape socio-political responses to people seeking international protection, and how these intersect with other categories, mainly that of race (also in a form of cultural racism that includes religion). In other words, how gender contributes to the construction of desirable and undesirable refugees. To answer these questions, selected gender representations of asylum-seekers from the Polish-Belarusian border in the Polish public debate have been analysed in the context of the images of Ukrainian refugee bodies and those who after 2015 tried to reach the European Union through the Mediterranean Sea. I have decided to focus on governmental materials (i.e. the Polish prime minister’s parliamentary speeches, press conference materials posted on the government’s website www.gov.pl, and Border Guard social media) as well as public (i.e. governmental) media coverage, mainly those in the key state-run television news channel *TVP Info*. I believe that they reflect the logic behind implementing various policies toward particular groups of people seeking international protection in Poland and thus require particular attention. They have also played a crucial

² See, for instance, Cuban refugees welcomed with open arms in the United States after the takeover of power by Fidel Castro, or people fleeing to Western Europe from behind the Iron Curtain during the Cold War.

role in normalising certain views on refugees already expressed by the then ruling conservative-nationalist Law and Justice party in 2015 that significantly contributed to this party's electoral victory in October 2015 (Fomina, Kucharczyk 2018: 185–188; cf. CBOS 2017). In this critical discourse analysis, supported by my own experiences as an “expert” in the public debate on refugees, I refer to the postcolonial theory, demonstrating that gendered and racialised colonial discourses underpin rationalisations about who has and who does not have a right to be a refugee.

This article starts with an ethnographic vignette through which I discuss the rhetorical shifts in the Polish public debate on the 2015 “refugee crisis” in Europe that replaced a figure of a “refugee” with that of a “migrant”, and finally a “Muslim (male) migrant”. In order to understand the logic of such shifts, the second section of the article is dedicated to the ways colonial discourses constructed gender – both femininity and masculinity – and the ways they intersected with race. Such representations are the “colonial legacies” and inform the ways in which gender, and especially the gender of the racialised “Other”, is perceived today. In the third section, I discuss the role of gender in constructing the figure of an “ideal victim” in the field of refugee-hood; in other words, I answer the question of why a woman better fits the category of a “true refugee” than a man. Finally, in the two last sections, I take a closer look at men seeking asylum and analyse their representations which make them undeserving of empathy and international protection; in other words, make them non-refugees.

From “refugees” to “Muslim migrants”

Since 2015, the topic of refugeehood and migration, earlier mostly neglected in the Polish public debate, has become vital. As a member of the Centre for Migration Studies at the Adam Mickiewicz University in Poznań, I was often approached by the media to comment on the “crisis”. At the very beginning, in the spring of 2015, journalists mostly referred to people attempting to reach Europe on boats as refugees who were portrayed in the media coverage as victims of war searching for a safe place. Over time, however, I noticed that when asked questions by the same journalists, I mostly heard the term “migrants” instead of refugees. This rhetorical shift was not innocent – replacing the word “refugee” with “migrant” in fact suggested economic and therefore less morally justified motivations of those who wanted to reach the UE (cf. Holmes, Castañeda 2016). Céline Cantat (2022), when discussing the “selective empathy” at Europe’s borders, noticed that “[I]njunctions to distinguish between ‘bad migrants’ and ‘good refugees’ became articulated with local regimes of social valuation and their racialised, gendered, class- and religion-based hierarchies in the context of regional capitalist transitions”.

As anthropologists, we are obviously aware of what has been demonstrated by Heaven Crawley and Dimitris Skleparis in their study of people who crossed the

Mediterranean Sea to Greece in 2015 – that both these categories “fail to capture adequately the complex relationship between political, social and economic drivers of migration or their shifting significance for individuals over time and space” (2018: 48). Also, in legal terms, only the procedure of claiming refugee status according to the international law, based on the 1951 Convention Relating to the Status of Refugees, may be the basis of judging whether this claim is justified or not. However, labelling people seeking international protection as migrants undermines these claims and “has been used to justify policies of exclusion and containment” (Crawley, Skleparis 2018: 48; see also Wagner-Saffray 2020). Making the public in European societies think of asylum seekers as migrants served to exempt them from all responsibility for protecting the latter. This explains why the politicians representing the ruling coalition in Poland almost never use the term “refugees” when referring to the people at the Polish-Belarusian border – these are “migrants” or even “illegal migrants” to emphasise the criminal aspect of their mobility³. Although, in international law, there is nothing like an “illegal” asylum seeker – a person who is going to claim refugee status does not have to possess any documents, nor does such a person have to cross the border only in designated places; the only thing such a person should do is to express the will to claim asylum⁴.

Moreover, soon after, in the autumn of 2015, the category of “Muslim” appeared in journalists’ questions which I was to address. It entailed the arguments about essentially perceived cultural differences and the inability or even unwillingness of “Muslim migrants” to adapt to life in Europe (see e.g. Haddad, Balz 2006). This is how “the use of different categories to describe those on the move has become deeply politicised” (Crawley, Skleparis 2018: 49) in the context of the 2015 “crisis” which is reflected even in the way this crisis has been termed in the public debate, initially as a “refugee crisis” and with time as a “migration crisis”. As a result, over just a few months, a refugee in the public debate in Europe was reduced to a Muslim migrant – a potential terrorist or, at least, a social parasite, imposing his own values on a receiving society (Fomina, Kucharczyk 2018: 190; Goździak, Márton 2018; Krzyżanowska,

³ See e.g. the speech of the Polish prime minister, Mateusz Morawiecki, on the situation at the Polish-Belarusian border, which I analyse later on in this article: Materiały wideo – Sytuacja za wschodnią granicą – Portal Gov.pl (www.gov.pl) (Accessed: 13.08.2023). At some point, in this rhetoric shifts, even the category of “tourists” was recalled to undermine the moral grounds on which those people move: Straż Graniczna w serwisie X: „Zdjęcia ujawnione w telefonach nielegalnych imigrantów pokazują, że na Białoruś wyjeżdżają turystycznie, przez kilka dni zwiedzają stolicę tego państwa, a potem transportowani są pod polską granicę, którą próbują nielegalnie sforsować: <https://t.co/tJ8lh8mGPJ>” / X (twitter.com) (Accessed: 26.10.2023).

⁴ According to the United Nations High Commissioner for Refugees, the non-refoulement principle has priority here since it “engages the State’s responsibility as soon as someone claims to be at risk or to fear return to his or her country of origin or any other country. There is no single correct formula or phrase for how this fear needs to be expressed” and it “requires States to respect the principle of non-discrimination, and to refrain from restricting entry on the basis of a person’s nationality, religion, ethnicity, health status, or other criteria” (IPU, UNHCR 2017: 69).

Krzyżanowski 2018; Jaskułowski 2019: 31–53). Soon, we could witness both verbal and physical attacks on people perceived as unwanted “Muslim migrants”, even if these were Hindu Indians, Christian Syrians, or even a Chilean citizen – just to recall a few examples – which was a direct consequence of the racialisation of refugees/migrants’ bodies (Strani, Szczepaniak-Kozak 2018). Extreme nationalism, xenophobia, and Islamophobia had their heyday, in Europe and in Poland, although the latter did not accept any refugees (Pustolnicescu 2016; Buchowski 2016). The same images were employed when asylum-seekers turned up at the Polish-Belarusian border in 2021. These were mostly men who were shown in the media to prove that these are not victims worth our empathy⁵; that their “lives and bodies are [not] ‘deserving’ of life-saving protection” (Lindberg et al. 2022).

Colonial constructions of gender

A significant body of postcolonial writing has been dedicated to the ways in which femineity and masculinity were shaped in colonial discourses (see Ram 2018). Female bodies used to be presented as vulnerable and deprived of agency – they were the objects of men’s actions, a battleground of ideological struggle between male colonisers and colonised men. As Gayatri Ch. Spivak – one of the leading postcolonial critics working on the intersections of race and gender in colonial discourse and policies – concluded in her famous phrase, “white men saving brown women from brown men” (1993: 93). She referred to the “social reforms” imposed by colonial powers and addressed to women when the practice of sati was abolished in India and the veiling of women was prohibited in Algeria (Fanon 1967). Defining certain practices towards women in colonised societies as backward – or even barbaric – let colonisers legitimise their authority as a civilising mission (Loomba 2015: 140). Often, however, their outcome was contrary to that which was officially declared. “White men” strengthened these practices by making colonised men defend what was under attack because the latter identified female bodies with the essence of the traditional culture and thus anti-colonial nationalism (Chatterjee 1989)⁶. In all these struggles over female

⁵ See e.g. the article entitled “Thirty Attempts to Cross the Polish-Belarusian Border. Illegal Migrants Crossed Świsłocz River” published in the newspaper “Gazeta Współczesna” which is owned by the governmental company: *Trzydzieści prób sforsowania granicy polsko-białoruskiej. Nielegalni migranci przeprawili się przez Świsłocz*, *Gazeta Współczesna* (wspolczesna.pl) (Accessed: 18.08.2023). It reads: “Seven foreigners were captured by the Border Guard patrols from Białowieża, one from Dubicze Cerkiewne and one from Mielnik. They were citizens of Syria, Egypt, Yemen, Mali, Congo, Ghana, and Nigeria. The foreigners revealed while illegally crossing the border are mostly young men who [earlier] stayed in Russia on the basis of legal visas.” See also the analysis of the governmental press materials later in this article.

⁶ Later on, “white men” were joined by “white women”, and then by “brown high-class women” in the role of “rescuers”. Ratna Kapur (2002), for instance, shows how a woman as a “victim subject” is used in the “violence against women” campaigns in India and thus reinforces gender essentialism in the international women’s human rights arena.

bodies, women's voices remained muted. This inspired Spivak to ask a fundamental question for the entire postcolonial studies: "Can the Subaltern Speak?" (1993). For Spivak, a woman – and particularly, a sati burned at her husband's funeral pyre, the most perfect example of a silenced subject (Loomba 2015: 231) – became a topical figure of the Subaltern.

The Subaltern is one of the key categories developed by postcolonial critics which gave a name to their founding research group, i.e. the Subaltern Studies Group, at the beginning of the 1980s (Guha 1982). The concept was borrowed from Antonio Gramsci (1996) who used it with reference to the working classes (i.e. "proletariat"). Postcolonial critics adopted the term to name social groups that were excluded from political representations: peasants whose voices were appropriated by the elites (Guha 1982) and women on whose behalf men spoke, both the colonisers and the colonised (Spivak 1993). Women were also a prototype for Edwin Ardener's (1975) muted group theory, developed in the field of feminist anthropology a decade earlier. Ardener noticed that certain groups are silenced by the "dominant structures" of society. Originally, his concept referred to women and was grounded in the criticism of anthropological representations of the world created exclusively from a male perspective. Men as ascribed to the public sphere have the power to create binding discourses. Women are not "mute" because they do not speak – they do so but in a language different from the recognised male one and thus they are not heard.

The female colonised body was thus constructed as the one that needed to be saved while the male colonised body as the one that posed a threat (Loomba 2015: 153–171). We can project these images onto the categories of "deserving" and "undeserving" victims, "good" and "bad" refugees. The process of securitisation of the external borders which has been observed in the European Union is discursively based on "intertwined and mutually dependent representations of racialized, masculinized threat and racialized, feminized vulnerability, which are woven into the scaffolding of colonial modernity" (Gray, Franck 2019: 275). Postcolonial studies prove that the images and categories produced and reproduced by colonialism are still discursively present in the contemporary world, feeding our imaginaries. The most profound study in this regard is Edward Said's (1979) critique of the representations of the inhabitants of the "non-West" – including women – grounded in the analysis of the order of discourse (Foucault 1981). Said demonstrated that "knowledge" about "the Orient" created by colonial Europe legitimised power exercised over it (Loomba 2015: 61). The European representations of the colonised 'Other' present in academic writing, literature, and art were based on creating the binary opposition between Europe and its Others. The anthropologist Benoît de L'Estoile calls them "colonial legacies," "the past as it lives now" (2008) and urges us to follow their traces in the present. The colonial past and the discourses it shaped underline contemporary perceptions and relationships and inform, among others, "the rhetoric and the categories mobilised when Europeans deal with migrants from other continents" (de L'Estoile 2008: 267;

see e.g. Mayblin 2017; Picozza 2021). Critical scholars of the security regime argue that “within [...] gendered racial order, policies, discourse, and everyday practices surrounding border security, migration, asylum, and war reinforce each other to construct ‘Europe’ and ‘the West’ as normatively white spaces, under threat from racialised Others within and without” (Baker 2012: 124).

A woman (with a child) as an “ideal victim”

A woman thus much better fits the figure of an “ideal victim” (Christie 1986) than a man according to the patriarchal patterns of femineity reproduced both in colonial and nationalist discourses: she is innocent, vulnerable, submissive, and deprived of agency (Ticktin 2017). A woman with a child fits an “ideal victim” figure even better (Enloe 1990)⁷. Such a figure – a passive, suffering subject, reliant on external help, and grateful to their benefactors – is crucial for the “politics of piety” (Boltanski 2004: 3–19) on which the entire charity industry is constructed with its paternalistic notion of help (cf. Höijer 2004; Sandvik 2009; Meyers 2011; Dunn 2017; Wagner 2018). An “ideal victim” figure is often employed politically by politicians and media in order to trigger or undermine the calls for solidarity with asylum-seekers. Also, humanitarian workers and human rights activists use it when appealing to public opinion⁸. Alicja Pałęcka (2023), on the basis of the analysis of the photographs that were sent by people who got stuck in the woods at the Polish-Belarusin border and sought help contacting the emergency number of the Salvation Foundation (Fundacja Ocalenie), noticed that these were rarely the photos of men asking for help. More often, these were children’s images demonstrating that a child is an even “better victim” than a woman given the former’s greater vulnerability attributed to minors:

In this context, forest selfies of young men seem to me to be an act of courage. It is hard to assume that this is the intention of the message authors, but this is the discursive power and effect of these messages. For the recipient, it is a bold confrontation with that part of Western public opinion which says: these are strong, healthy, young men who do not have to flee their countries, who do not need help, but who, instead, threaten our social order (Pałęcka 2023: 5).

⁷ But a refugee woman who was raped during a war and needs abortion does not. Such Ukrainian women encountered in Poland a very restrictive law (enforced by the Polish government in 2021) and the activities of the anti-abortion groups. In Poland, in the case of pregnancy resulting from a criminal act, a woman can have a legal abortion but only after the prosecutor’s confirmation and only up to the 12th week of pregnancy. The majority of Ukrainian female refugees were not able to meet these conditions. Many decided to return to Ukraine. See: Centre for Reproductive Rights et al. 2023.

⁸ See, for instance, the cover image of the report of the Helsinki Foundation for Human Rights on the situation at the Polish-Belarusian border *Where the Law Does not Reach* (Czarnota, Górczyńska 2022) where one can see a person (seemingly a woman) caring a child in her arms and being surrounded by two armed men.

As a result, in Poland, since February 2022, there have been two co-existing figures of a refugee: “good”/“real”/“true” and “bad”/“fake”/“non-” refugees (see Zessin-Jurek 2022; Babakova et al. 2022): white, Christian, female refugees, usually accompanied by children, from Ukraine; and non-white, Muslim, male refugees – or “illegal migrants” – at the Polish-Belarusian border (Lindberg et al. 2022)⁹. As Lidia Zessin-Jurek writes, “White Ukrainian mothers fleeing with their children are seen as ‘real refugees’, as opposed to the iconography of ‘vicious migrants’, that is, men with darker skin throwing stones at border guards” (2022). These figures reflect two different mobility regimes: one welcoming asylum-seekers and facilitating their arrival and another one pushing them back. This “double standard” – or “selective empathy” (Cantat 2022) – is not only characteristic of Poland but reflects the attitude observed in the entire European Union. It can be seen in the countries’ policies, security forces’ practices, and regular citizens’ opinions (Babakova et al. 2022).

Men as national heroes and non-refugees

The importance of the category of gender in framing the figure of an “ideal victim” was very visible in the negative attitude of the Polish receiving society toward male Ukrainian refugees. Patrycja Trzeszczyńska, Svitlana Luchik-Musiyezdova, and Joanna Dymanus (2022), in the report on Ukrainian war refugees in Krakow, observed that Ukrainian men searching for help on social media were confronted with condemning comments referring to their failed obligation to serve in the army. A nationalist argument that was also raised in the anti-refugee public debate in 2015, says that man’s duty in the context of war is to defend his homeland and not “cowardly run away” (Zessin-Jurek 2022). A man who does not do that, seeking asylum in the European Union, is morally doubtful; he is not a refugee but a migrant abandoning his wife and children, and egoistically seeking a better life in “our world”, posing a threat to “our” prosperity and security (Kabata, Jacobs 2022). Presented as such the men from the Polish-Belarusian border have been contrasted with Ukrainian men, pictured as war heroes, and thus fitting the expected role (Wojnicka, Mellström, de Boise 2022). Although the former are often sent by their families because they believe that men

⁹ People seeking international protection at the Polish-Belarusian border seem to be aware of this distinction. Pałęcka cites one of the messages sent to the activists at the emergency number: “We hope that you will help us with only one thing....which is to deliver our voice to the whole world and through all the newspapers...because what is happening is atrocious against humanity...why don’t they treat us like they treat Ukrainian refugees. my friends and I are not criminals...we are fleeing from the conditions of war in our country... I am a civil engineer, my friend is an agricultural engineer, and the other is a pharmacist...etc (...) It’s dirty racism and we have to confront it” (2023: 7). And another desperate message sent by a man who sought help for a group of people that got stuck in the special border zone where the Salvation Foundation did not operate: “Why saving Ukrainian And leaving Iraqis to diw [die] Just tell meeeee why?” (2023: 12).

can handle a dangerous and risky journey and, when being granted asylum, they can initiate the process of family reunification; the latter have no other option because of the ban on Ukrainian men between the ages of 18 and 60 from leaving the country, which is a very radical example of the gender-based violence inflicted on men by political leaders (Wojnicka, Mellström, de Boise 2022: 85)¹⁰. In this view, men have no right to feel fear, or to save their lives and health; in other words, they have no right to be refugees. As a result, as the study of Trzeszczyńska, Luchik-Musiyezdova, and Dymanus (2022) showed, these were mostly Ukrainian women who sought support on social media for their male relatives: “The dad is looking for a job” or “The father-in-law needs a doctor” (2022: 29). The researchers noticed, that “at the beginning of a new phase of the war [full-scale invasion], negative judgment was extended to men who had not lived in Ukraine for a long time” (2022: 29), i.e. who were migrants already settled in Poland.

Such a negative judgment was shared by the Ukrainian men in Ukraine, demonstrating how deeply the nationalist and militarised pattern of masculinity is rooted in our imaginations (Wojnicka, Mellström, de Boise 2022: 86). The most significant example – widely reported in the media – was the act of shaming a group of Ukrainian men who tried to enter Poland by the Ukrainian border guards. The governmental television news channel TVP Info informed: “On the night of the 8th of March, the State Border Guard Service of Ukraine detained 12 men who were trying to leave the country. The officers gave the refugees tulips which are given to women on their holiday [the 8th of March, i.e. International Women’s Day]”¹¹. The scene of handing out flowers was filmed and posted online to prevent other men from attempting to seek asylum in Poland¹². The same television reported on other attempts, mocking men who were not presented as asylum-seekers but ridiculous cowards avoiding their duty: “A 30-year-old man from Kyiv wanted to leave the country disguised as his wife and with her passport. Another man hid in a box in the trunk of the car that was driven by a woman accompanied by two children who were fleeing the war”¹³. “A wig, women’s clothes, and heavy makeup did not help” – the author of the news commented on the former case. The latter example indicates clearly that among people of the same nationality travelling in one car, the woman and children

¹⁰ The exemption from military service is related mainly to care work, usually associated with women: being a father of at least three children, being a single father, being a father taking care of a child with disability or other dependant person. Other exceptions include students and academics as well as parliamentarians and those already serving in other state services (art. 23 of the Decree of the President of Ukraine no. 69/2022).

¹¹ Próbowali uciec z Ukrainy przed mobilizacją. Dostali kwiaty od Straży Granicznej – tvp.info (Accessed: 25.08.2023).

¹² Їх зустрічали з квітами. Мова про 12 уклоністів, яких вночі 8 березня затримали на кордоні – YouTube (Access: 25.08.2023).

¹³ Straż Graniczna Ukrainy wyłapuje mężczyzn uciekających przed mobilizacją. Zbiegowie często zaskakują beczelnością lub desperacją – tvp.info (Accessed: 25.08.2023).

were considered war refugees while the man was categorised as a traitor shirking his duty to defend his homeland.

In the same news story, another “escape attempt” was reported: “A 53-year-old man who also tried to leave the country through the border crossing in Mogilev [in Belarus] showed a lot of insolence, or maybe stupidity. He submitted a document which showed that in 2009 he had been declared unfit for military service on the basis of an article on ‘pregnancy, childbirth and the postpartum period’”¹⁴. Here, analogically to the case with tulips, the man was shamed by comparing him to a woman.

Racialised male Other as a threat

Such a shaming performed by creating effeminated images of men was observed by postcolonial critics in the colonial representations interchangeably with the images of male Others as predators: “The Oriental male was effeminated, portrayed as homosexual, or else depicted as a lusty villain from whom the virile but courteous European could rescue the native (or the European) woman” (Loomba 2015: 154). Regarding the latter, the video materials on the situation at the Polish-Belarusian border presented on the Polish government’s website mostly contain reports on aggressive “illegal migrants” attacking Polish border guards: “Failed attempt by an aggressive group to cross the border illegally”; “Polish officers guarding the border pelted with stones”; “A group of aggressive foreigners tried to forcefully cross the border”; “A group of over 200 people forced their way across the Polish-Belarusian border”; “Storming the border crossing”; “Migrants attack Polish positions at Kuźnica border crossing”, etc¹⁵. The videos show a man shooting with a slingshot and some others throwing stones. The only situations where women turn up in these materials, are when they are used by the Belarusian special forces to evoke public empathy: “A group of women and children were moved under the fence [at the border crossing in Kuźnica] so that the Belarusian services could prepare a propaganda material”¹⁶.

Also, in the parliamentary speech made on the 9th of November 2021 by the Polish prime minister, Mateusz Morawiecki, during the special session dedicated to the situation at the Polish-Belarusian border, the language of securitisation dominated:

The security of our eastern border is being violated in a very brutal way. [...] These are migrants, they are not refugees. It is also worth emphasising because these terms are confused by some people. Those migrants were used [by Lukashenka] as human shields in

¹⁴ Straż Graniczna Ukrainy wyłapuje mężczyzn uciekających przed mobilizacją. Zbiegowie często zaskakują bezczelnością lub desperacją – tvp.info (Accessed: 25.08.2023).

¹⁵ Materiały wideo – Sytuacja za wschodnią granicą – Portal Gov.pl (www.gov.pl) (Accessed: 15.08.2023).

¹⁶ Materiały wideo – Sytuacja za wschodnią granicą – Portal Gov.pl (www.gov.pl) (Accessed: 15.08.2023).

order to destabilise the situation in the Republic of Poland, in Lithuania, the Baltic States, and the entire European Union. [...] if it was not for these security measures [barrier built at the border], today these columns of migrants, pushed from behind by the rifle butts of the Belarusian special services, would already be marching across the Polish border. [...] There are days when there are several hundred attacks daily. Several hundred attempts to cross the border¹⁷.

Anytime the Polish prime minister referred to the people attempting to cross the border, he used the male form of the word “migrants”. In the Polish language (as in many other languages), the male form is commonly used in plural nouns to describe collectively both men and women, in the same speech, however, when referring to the border services officers, Mateusz Morawiecki recalled both male and female forms (Polish *funkcjonariusze i funkcjonariuszki*), so we can assume that he intentionally used only the male form of the noun “migrants”. When answering the questions asked by the members of the Parliament, he even strengthened the military rhetoric, framing male migrants as a direct threat to the security of the Polish state, and thus “weaponising migration” (Greenhill 2010). He spoke about “[a state of emergency and a barrier at the border being necessary] for an effective fight against this migratory onslaught provoked by Lukashenka” and about “the columns of migrants from Arab countries marching towards the European Union”¹⁸. The rhetorical shifts described in the first section of this article are clearly visible here: the word “refugee” has been intentionally replaced with the word “migrant”, used in a male form, and associated with Islam. To further demonise men at the Polish-Belarusian border, the Polish government, during the press conference of the Ministers of National Defense, and the Interior and Administration as well as the head of the Border Guard, convened on the 27th of September 2021, the migrants were associated with terrorism, and even pedophilia and zoophilia:

Polish services verified the identity of some illegal migrants detained after crossing the Polish-Belarusian border. The officers identified materials proving links of some of the detainees with terrorist organizations. One Iraqi citizen had pictures of pedophile and zoophile materials on his phone. Others – photos in combat uniforms, beheaded people, and meetings of terrorist organisations¹⁹.

The media coverage of this conference prepared by the Polish public news channel, *TVP Info*, was titled: “Shocking materials of the [security] services about detained migrants: terrorism, decapitations, deviations.” Mariusz Kamiński, the Minister of the

¹⁷ Materiały wideo – Sytuacja za wschodnią granicą – Portal [Gov.pl \(www.gov.pl\)](http://www.gov.pl) (Accessed: 15.08.2023).

¹⁸ Materiały wideo – Sytuacja za wschodnią granicą – Portal [Gov.pl \(www.gov.pl\)](http://www.gov.pl) (Accessed: 15.08.2023).

¹⁹ Powiązania z terroryzmem, zdjęcia pedofilskie i zoofilskie, ścięte głowy. Służby ujawniają szokujące materiały o migrantach z Białorusi. – tvp.info (Accessed: 16.08.2023).

Interior and Administration, said: “It is not about stigmatising anyone, it is about facts showing who is storming our border. We need to share these findings with the public [...]”²⁰. Here we have one more dimension of the gender representations of asylum seekers/migrants – the hypersexuality of racialised men presented as a threat to the host country. This image was already used in the anti-refugee debate in 2015 when dark-skin Muslim men were presented as rapists of European women. Łukasz Bertram and Michał Jędrzejek from the Polish Observatory of the Public Debate who analysed the media discourse on refugees in September 2015 observed that in the far right-wing Polish press like *fronda.pl*, asylum seekers attempting to reach Europe were “described almost exclusively through the prism of their alleged radical otherness, expressed especially in their tendency to violence – also, or perhaps primarily, sexual violence. Refugees are, after all, ‘barbarians,’ ‘wild hordes’ or even ‘Asian savages’” (2015). Article headlines in *fronda.pl* or *niezalezna.pl* often recalled the cases of sexual violence: “Muslims gang raped the head of an immigration centre” or “Rape plague in Germany” (Bertram, Jędrzejek 2015). Violent hypersexuality – in the above-recalled press conference of the ministers expressed in the form of pedophilia and zoophilia – was treated as inherent to the Muslim religion thus being an example of cultural racism in the form of Islamophobia. Islamophobia that is shared by both liberal secularism (here, Islam is blamed for patriarchal norms restraining women’s rights) and conservative Christianity (that sees Islam as a threat to the national values and/or European civilisation built on the Christian heritage; see Bobako 2017²¹).

Conclusion

In this article, I demonstrated how gendered and racialised imaginaries about mobile bodies present in the Polish public debate shape migration control and asylum governance. The intersection of gender and race cannot be overlooked here – if female refugees from Ukraine were not “white”/Christian, they probably would not be that welcomed. They were welcomed because they were presented as “just like us”²². One can just recall the refusal by the Polish border guards to accept asylum claims from women and children from Chechnya at the Polish-Belarusian border that has been observed since 2015 after the government led by the Law and Justice party took power

²⁰ Powiązania z terroryzmem, zdjęcia pedofilskie i zoofilskie, ścięte głowy. Służby ujawniają szokujące materiały o migrantach z Białorusi. – *tvp.info* (Accessed: 16.08.2023).

²¹ Among a huge body of literature on Islamophobia, I refer to the Monika Bobako’s book because it analyses anti-Muslim discourse of the religious right in Poland (see also Buchowski 2016).

²² See *Ukrainians are Just Like Us’ – But So Are Refugees from All Over the World* – The University Times (Accessed: 28.08.2023). Interestingly, Ukrainian migrants who had lived in Poland before the full-scale war were not perceived as such – rather as “white but not quite”, i.e. as less civilised as compared to “us”, similar to how Western Europe perceives Central European countries, including Poland (Kalmar 2022).

in Poland (see e.g. Klaus 2020).²³ Also, among people fleeing the war in Ukraine, there were Roma families (again, with a number of women and children) and university students from Asian and African countries (including female students), and these were not welcomed as white Christian Ukrainian women were. However, it is worth mentioning that the attitudes towards the male refugees from both these groups (i.e. Roma and international non-white students) were definitely more negative than towards the female refugees, including racist comments posted on social media and physical attacks (Babakova et al. 2022: 6–7).

Moreover, there are other dimensions that intersect here, creating moral hierarchies, including those of religion and class (Cantat 2022). Territorialised religion is, however, attributed to race, with “white” meaning Christian and “non-white” – Muslim, thus being a classic example of cultural racism in which essentialist characteristics are ascribed not to the bearers of particular biological features but to the particular culture (Blaut 2006). The class dimension, on the other hand, often intersects with gender – these were usually men who were pictured in the media with cellphones or in a good-quality dress which were to be proof of their wealth. And the wealth does not correspond with being a refugee: a “genuine refugee must be poor” as if a refugee was an economic and not a political category (see Bloch 2021).

Of course, there are many paradoxes in the ways the imaginaries about people seeking international protection are constructed. On the one hand, when it comes to the capitalist utility of the migrant bodies, the nation-states have nothing against the non-white male bodies, even if from Muslim countries (cf. Kaczmarek 2012). At the same time when pushing back those bodies through the border to Belarus, the Polish government planned to recruit six thousand migrant workers for its strategic petrochemical complex construction, mostly from Asian and Middle Eastern countries²⁴. Also, the arguments about refugees’ economic uselessness (a figure of a refugee draining the welfare system) contradict with a greater willingness to accept women as refugees although, in the Polish case, the women fleeing the war in Ukraine, mostly single mothers, often were not able to work full-time. Finally, when Ukrainian mothers were presented as caring mothers saving their children, Syrian mothers at the Polish-Belarusian border “were accused of being irresponsible and of endangering their children during the crossing to Poland” (Babakova et al. 2022: 12).

Last but not least, one more gender-related aspect that has been beyond the scope of this article is the perception of non-binary refugees, whose situation is often

²³ It should be mentioned here that in the 1990s and early 2000s, Poland accepted refugees from Chechnya, both men and women, on the ground of a “common enemy,” i.e. Russia, which also played an important role in welcoming refugees fleeing the Russian invasion of Ukraine. However, as shown in this article, the openness towards Ukrainian female and male refugees was not equal. Also, receiving of refugees from Chechnya took place before Islamophobia escalated after the 9/11 terrorist attacks in the United States.

²⁴ Tysiące obcokrajowców wprowadza się do miasteczka pod Płockiem. Będą pracować dla Orlenu (biznesinfo.pl) (Accessed: 28.08.2023).

even more challenging. However, again, in the political atmosphere of welcoming refugees from Ukraine, there was a space for the Polish LGBTQ+ organisations to offer support to those refugees while the criminalisation of both people seeking international protection as well as activists trying to help them at the Polish-Belarusian border made such refugees invisible there (see Sarnecka 2023).

To conclude, women better fit the category of an “ideal victim” and a “good”/“real”/“true” refugee due to the patriarchal and nationalist patterns of femininity. Men, on the contrary, presented as either national fighters (or, if they failed to fulfil this role, as traitors) or a threat to the host country (including the sexual one), appear as those who have no right to be refugees. But it is crucial to remember about intersectionality here – not only the gender of mobile bodies but also their race (in terms of cultural racism that includes religion) and socio-economic status (i.e. class) decide about “who deserves to be a refugee” (Wojnicka, Mellström, de Boise 2022: 86). The postcolonial critical readings of the colonial representations of racialised and gendered bodies of the “Others” show us that these discursive constructions have been reproduced by Europe for a long time.

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