CREATING SPACES OF SOLIDARITY: GENDER PERSPECTIVES ON MIGRATION AND COMMUNITY ENGAGEMENT

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Abstract: This interview brings together three practitioners working at the intersection of migration, gender, and art to examine how cultural practices become forms of resistance in contexts of displacement. Through reflections on community organising, feminist pedagogies, and the politics of fear shaping contemporary Europe, the conversation highlights the gendered dimensions of migration, the risks of institutional instrumentalisation, and the transformative potential of art for visibility and agency.

Keywords: migration; gender; community; art; solidarity

This interview was the echo of the conference *The Promise of (Un) Happiness? Gender, Labour, and Migration*, held in 2024 within the Women in Tech Academic programme. It brings together the voices and practices of women activists, researchers, and artists who work directly on the ground in contexts shaped by displacement, war, and structural inequality. Their situated knowledge — formed through daily engagement with migrant communities — offers insights that are often absent from institutional narratives and academic frameworks. The conversation highlights how gendered labour, care, vulnerability, and resistance unfold in migratory contexts, and how cultural and artistic practices can become counter-infrastructures of support.

The interview features three contributors whose work spans humanitarian support, artistic practice, and research. Maria (Maro) Beburia is a cultural, humanitarian, and community worker from Odesa, now based in Warsaw, co-founder of the BLYZKIST collective and the Solidarity Community Center "Słonecznik," and currently a Program Specialist at Polish Humanitarian Action. Marina Naprushkina is a Berlin-based feminist artist and activist, founder of the Office for Anti-Propaganda and co-founder of Neue Nachbarschaft/Moabit, whose long-term practice centres collective self-organisation and migrant-led infrastructures. Amilia Stanevich (name changed) is a researcher and cultural worker based in Poland, offering critical insights into institutional practices, political instrumentalisation, and the gendered dimensions of migration.

By foregrounding these grounded, practice-based perspectives, this issue of *Topos Journal* extends its academic boundaries, integrating voices that are rarely centred in scholarly debates yet essential for understanding the lived realities of migration, gender, and cultural work today.

Antonina Stebur: Could you share what brought you into this field? What personal or political experiences led you to engage with questions of migration, displacement, and community work?

Amilia Stanevich: My work in the field of migration was shaped by my own experience of displacement, which began in February 2020 and continues to this day. Migration — especially when this experience is lived through alone — places a person in conditions where it is very easy to lose one's grounding and motivation to act. My activities are primarily focused on integration and on creating opportunities for collaboration between migrants and cultural institutions in Poland. Many state institutions remain, in practice, "inflexible" due to

extensive documentation requirements and the absence of procedures adapted for working with migrants. This is linked to several factors: legal ones (such as the lack of experience in employing migrants), resource-related constraints (underfunding, shortage of specialists), cultural differences, as well as insufficient understanding of the specificities of migrant communities. For this reason, I see the need to foster dialogue between migrants and institutions, to develop adaptive support mechanisms, and to cultivate practices that take into account the diversity of cultural experience and contribute to successful integration into Polish society.

Maro Beburia: I have been working in the cultural and NGO sector for years. As a migrant and the daughter of a migrant, I am deeply committed to promoting social justice, cultural inclusion, and community resilience.

In 2020, together with Taras Gembik, we created the BLYZKIST collective (from the Ukrainian word for "closeness"), which focuses on constituency engagement, particularly among people with migration and refugee backgrounds, as well as other marginalized communities. I am also a co-founder of the *Solidary Community Centre* "*Sunflower*," established in the early days of the Russian invasion of Ukraine as a crisis centre for solidarity and mutual aid.

Marina Naprushkina: My involvement in this field emerged not from a planned artistic project, but from a very direct encounter with the realities of displacement. In 2013, a refugee shelter was opened in a disused school building next to my home in Berlin-Moabit. Many families with children were placed without kitchens, with limited sanitation, and without access to education. My first contact was with the mothers living in the shelter. As a mother myself, it felt natural to engage, to listen, and to respond. What followed was not a "project," but a spontaneous form of responsibility: I used my exhibition budget to open a small studio inside the shelter where women and children could gather. Within weeks, this informal intervention grew into *Neue Nachbarschaft/Moabit*, a self-organised community of neighbours, artists, and newly arrived migrants working together to create support structures the state failed to provide.

I am often asked whether my own experience of migration shaped my sensitivity to these issues. It is a complicated question. I am not a refugee; my experience as a migrant cannot be equated with the experiences of, for example, Chechen mothers arriving with ten children after fleeing war. The differences in conditions, histories, and vulnerabilities are profound. Media narratives often tried to collapse these

distinctions, to fit me into a neat representational category: the migrant woman who now works with migrants. Such simplifications are politically convenient, but they obscure more than they reveal.

Yes, certain aspects of my background — my own encounters with bureaucracy, the feeling of being outside established structures — may have made certain forms of injustice more visible to me. But *Neue Nachbarschaft/Moabit* was never about my personal story. The initiative grew through the involvement of many people, including those with diverse migration histories — from post-Soviet migrants who arrived in Germany as children in the 1990s to neighbours who engaged because they recognised that state institutions were failing. Their knowledge and experience were essential, and often invisible to those who had never confronted the complexities of asylum procedures, residency permits, or systemic neglect.

Antonina Stebur: Given that this issue of our journal focuses on migration and gender, could you reflect on how gender shapes migration trajectories? In your experience, how do gendered expectations and forms of socialisation influence the processes of displacement and adaptation, and the additional forms of labour that migrant women often take on?

Marina Naprushkina: Gender profoundly shapes the experience of migration. For individuals raised within forms of female socialisation, the migration process differs significantly from that of those socialised as men. For many women, the pressures and expectations are amplified at multiple stages of displacement — regardless of whether they have children. Women are often burdened with greater responsibility, both socially and within the family, and many arrive from contexts characterised by patriarchal norms, authoritarian state structures, and strong familial control.

Migration can sometimes offer hope — the possibility to renegotiate one's position or to imagine a life with greater autonomy. Yet in practice this hope often collides with intensified forms of control. In a new country, without established networks of support and often without immediate access to employment, many women find themselves monitored even more closely, sometimes by relatives who are not physically present but who exert remote oversight over their movements, decisions, and relationships. This creates what I would call a "social hunger": the loss of support structures combined with heightened pressure and isolation.

These dynamics are especially pronounced among women from strongly patriarchal or clan-based societies — such as some groups

from Chechnya — or from contexts where women's freedoms were historically limited. Even when women migrate to societies with more liberal gender norms, the migration process itself can produce a counter-reaction: families or communities may become more conservative as a protective mechanism in a new environment. Research has shown that migration can, paradoxically, reinforce traditional gender roles, and I see this frequently in practice.

At the same time, women often carry a disproportionate share of communicative, emotional, and bureaucratic labour in the migration process. They are frequently the ones who navigate administrative systems, manage family affairs, and enter the labour market earlier or under more pressure than male family members. All of this demonstrates that gender is not an auxiliary factor but a structuring force that profoundly shapes how displacement is lived, negotiated, and resisted.

Antonina Stebur: How do you see these dynamics unfolding in Poland, especially in light of the recent reports and data from the Ocalenie Foundation? What trends or concerns do you find most pressing?

Maro Beburia: We are now seeing the first effects of the new liberal government after eight years of PiS rule. While there are some improvements, much remains the same, and in some cases, things have even worsened. Polish society has long been shaped by a divisive narrative of "us" versus "them," with the definition of "them" shifting over time. Poland has always been multicultural, but only now has that diversity become too visible to ignore. It's becoming clear that neoliberalism is willing to align with fascist tendencies when it suits political interests. The current government's attempts to adopt right-wing rhetoric in order to appeal to conservative voters, but it doesn't work in their favour: leftists see it as a betrayal, and the right sees it as a weak and inauthentic attempt. The government's new policy on temporary restriction on the right to apply for international protection at the Belarus border did nothing to stop migration but significantly worsened the humanitarian crisis.

There is a growing sense of dissatisfaction with Ukrainians and fatigue with the ongoing war. Meanwhile, Ukrainian war refugees in Poland are working, paying taxes, and have significantly contributed to the country's GDP growth in 2024 (UNHCR, 2025). Yet for many, these facts aren't enough. They remain convinced that difficulties in accessing healthcare are not the result of deep systemic underfunding, but rather because Ukrainians are "taking up space" in the queues.

Antonina Stebur: Amilia Stanevich, as a researcher, how do you relate the current migratory processes to historical patterns of displacement in Poland? What continuities or ruptures do you see when comparing interwar and contemporary migration?

Amilia Stanevich: It is rather difficult for me to answer this question, as my research does not directly focus on migration; the topic appears only indirectly in my work. I can note, however, that while contemporary Belarusian migration to Poland is shaped by political or economic motives and constitutes an unorganised and individualised process, migration in the Polish territories historically (here I refer to the border regions with Belarus, that is, Podlasie, and extend the period from 1915 to 1946) was forced and systematically organised. One of the most traumatic experiences was the *bieżeństwo* of 1915 — the mass evacuation of predominantly Orthodox populations to the eastern and central governorates of the Russian Empire. The second significant and undoubtedly traumatic event in this context was the population exchange between Poland and the Belarusian Soviet Socialist Republic (BSSR), which was directly related to the establishment of a new political border. Both of these processes are described in the books of Polish journalist and publicist Aneta Prymaka-Oniszk (2016, 2024).

An interesting observation in this context is the choice of Białystok as a new place of residence for many migrants from Hrodna and other regions of Western Belarus. This may indicate not only geographic proximity but also the presence of historical and cultural memory connected to pre-war and interwar cross-border relations, shared linguistic and confessional backgrounds, as well as family ties — all of which play a role in shaping migration trajectories.

Antonina Stebur: Across Europe, conservative and right-wing political actors increasingly use anti-migration rhetoric as a political bargaining chip. Why do you think migration has become such a potent symbol in current political struggles? What are the gendered implications of this turn?

Marina Naprushkina: The political centrality of migration in Europe has intensified dramatically in the past year. In Germany, this shift became especially visible during the most recent political crisis, when migration was elevated to the defining issue of the election campaign. The rapid rise of the far-right Alternative für Deutschland (AfD) triggered a reaction across the political spectrum: centre-right and even centrist parties moved sharply to the right, adopting restrictive positions that would have been unthinkable only a few years ago. The

result is a broad political consensus around measures that fundamentally undermine constitutional rights and the right to asylum — changes that, despite their severity, have faced surprisingly little resistance or even public debate.

Part of the problem is the collapse of distinctions. Migration is increasingly conflated with questions of terrorism or internal security, even though these are entirely different issues and are recognised as such by refugees themselves. This conflation makes migration an easy target: a single, simplified narrative allows politicians to mobilise fear, define an externalised "other," and forge cohesion through exclusion. Economic inequality, lack of affordable housing, or infrastructural decay are far more difficult to address — migration becomes the symbolic shortcut.

This dynamic has deep historical roots in Germany. After reunification in the 1990s, far-right groups attacked Turkish guest workers; families were murdered in arson attacks such as the 1993 Solingen fire (Hille 2023); and, between 2000 and 2010, the National Socialist Underground (Engelhart 2017) carried out a series of killings targeting mostly migrant families. These patterns reveal a recurrent mechanism: during periods of social or economic uncertainty, migrants become the focal point onto which societal anxieties are projected.

As for the gendered dimensions, they are fully embedded in this political turn even if not always explicitly articulated. Anti-migration rhetoric often reinforces patriarchal imaginaries — constructing migrant men as threats and migrant women as subjects in need of surveillance or control.

So, migration is powerful as a political symbol not because it explains social crises, but because it offers an emotionally charged, easily manipulable narrative.

Amilia Stanevich: In recent years, the world has been increasingly plunged into a state of crisis, and the number of international migrants continues to grow — developments that have directly led to the deliberate use of migration as a political instrument. A prolonged process of targeted mythologisation, aimed at constructing, in the public imagination, the image of migrants as a threat, has activated widespread anxiety and fear within society. Fear, in turn, is instrumentalised by right-wing political parties, allowing them to position themselves as "protectors" of national security and the societal values upheld by a given state. The politics of fear is a highly appealing and effective strategy for those in power: it actively exploits emotions for the purpose of societal mobilisation, emotions that are far easier (and more politically advantageous) to trigger than rational thinking. Such

a politics enables authorities to keep society under control and to influence its psycho-emotional state.

With regard to gendered consequences, anti-migration policies contribute to the remilitarisation of masculinity and the strengthening of traditional gender roles. In such contexts, the female body often becomes a symbolic object of "protection," one that is perceived as requiring heightened regulation and control.

Antonina Stebur: What, in your view, makes art an essential tool for community engagement, political intervention, or emotional healing in migratory contexts?

Maro Beburia: For me, art is a tool, a medium to bring people together and build connections. Art becomes a pretext to meet, engage, and share stories and experiences; it can also be therapeutic. Art is still needed as a tool to speak about something as unimaginable as war. It is also an instrument for building community, working with society, and forming human relationships. Art teaches empathy and how to recognize pain.

Art and culture might not be the first needs of migrants after arriving in a new country, but they are essential for long-term integration, for both migrants and the host society. The presence of migrants in cultural institutions is especially important, as they broaden perspectives and bring unique experiences that enrich the cultural landscape.

Culture and art do not stop war; only weapons can do that, but they help us process the emotions and pain we experience daily. But also, to connect with our culture, our memories, while being away from home.

Amilia Stanevich: First and foremost, art becomes an effective instrument in migration contexts because it renders migrants visible within public space. Artistic practices and their presentation create conditions for self-representation, enabling migrants to articulate their own narratives in opposition to dominant discourses, which often frame their experiences through politically conditioned categories. Moreover, the presentation of artistic work creates opportunities for direct dialogue between migrants and the wider society, reducing stereotyping and opening pathways toward demythologisation and critical reflection. The possibility to tell one's own story is an important and often transformative process that restores a sense of agency.

Art is also a means of reinterpreting trauma and enabling emotional healing. Since the full-scale Russian invasion of Ukraine, art-therapeutic theatre activities — *theatrotherapy* — have become a fairly

common practice in Poland. These initiatives use theatre as a tool for relieving stress, restoring mental health, and supporting the integration of migrants. A significant feature of such initiatives is that they are conducted by migrant women *for* migrant women, which helps create a safe and trusting environment. Within such spaces, it becomes possible to engage delicately with vulnerable experiences, to offer mutual support, and to reframe trauma through creative expression.

Antonina Stebur: Could you share some examples of the artistic or cultural methodologies you use in your work? How do these practices center the voices and experiences of migrants, especially women and gender-diverse individuals?

Marina Naprushkina: In my experience, the most important methodological principle is to create a physical space in which people can genuinely meet one another. Working offline, being present together in the same room, is essential. Whether we are learning a language, cooking, making art, or discussing politics and history, these activities all function as forms of education, reflection, and dialogue. The space itself becomes a shared learning environment rather than a service offered "to" refugees. From the beginning, *Neue Nachbarschaft/Moabit* was never conceived as a project *for* migrants but as a space in which neighbours — including newly arrived migrants — could encounter one another on equal terms.

This required careful attention to hierarchy. Even seemingly small asymmetries — such as who speaks the local language, who understands bureaucratic structures, or who has lived in Germany longer — can shape power relations. We worked deliberately to minimise these imbalances by avoiding frontal teaching formats or top-down knowledge transmission. Instead, we created a constellation of overlapping practices: cooking sessions, language groups, art workshops, reading circles, music evenings. These activities intersected and allowed people to participate in different ways, without being reduced to a single identity category such as "refugee" or "teacher." This heterogeneity was crucial for centring migrant voices and building shared agency.

Artistic practice played a significant role in this ecology. For several years, linocut workshops formed one of our core methods. Linocut is an accessible technique — easy to learn and immediately gratifying. People could carve, print, and see a result within minutes. This opened a pathway for self-expression, especially for women who might be new to artistic processes. We also developed collective wall drawings and created collaborative text pieces across a large wall in our space. A literary group formed naturally, and it became an important site for

storytelling, reading, and writing across languages. Rather than privileging one artistic medium, we worked with whatever forms emerged from the community and supported people in developing their own practices.

Over time, as the initiative grew and became more complex, we began articulating our methodology more clearly. In 2019, we turned to historical models of progressive education — particularly Black Mountain College. We were interested in how art can function as a central mode of learning, enabling transdisciplinary forms of knowledge production. Black Mountain resonated strongly with our situation: it was also founded by refugees, and it operated as a non-hierarchical learning environment where teachers and students shared not only lectures but daily life — cooking, farming, organising communal activities. This model helped us articulate our own understanding of *Neue Nachbarschaft/Moabit* as a space of collective learning, care, and self-organisation.

Antonina Stebur: What ethical and political challenges do you face when using artistic tools in these highly vulnerable contexts?

Maro Beburia: The basis of the Russian genocide against Ukrainians lies in a culture war: the appropriation of Ukrainian artists, the theft of art from museums in occupied territories, all used later to support a narrative that Ukrainian culture doesn't exist, and therefore, that Ukraine itself doesn't exist.

This includes both the looting of museums in occupied territories and the destruction of places and institutions vital to our culture (including UNESCO heritage sites), as well as symbolic theft — the appropriation of works or figures from the Ukrainian cultural canon as part of Russian culture. Paradoxically, artists once rejected by the Soviet regime (like Malevich, who was tortured by Soviet police) are now used as symbols of "great Russian culture."

In recent years, great effort has been made by Ukrainian professionals working in Western cultural institutions to debunk these narratives and to decolonize them. Russia seeks to diminish the significance of our culture, language, and state — both physically and symbolically.

Right now, Ukrainian artists are on the front lines (Artslooker, 2025), providing humanitarian aid or creating works during air raid alarms or without electricity. At a time when war is also being waged on the cultural front, when museums and theaters are being destroyed, artworks are being stolen, and art is being appropriated by the aggressor both literally and symbolically, it is our duty to defend and promote Ukrainian culture and art.

Amilia Stanevich: I do not work directly with artistic media, but based on my observations of how cultural institutions engage with migrants, I would like to highlight several problems and challenges linked to the vulnerability of migrant communities. One of the key issues concerns representation and asymmetries of power: who speaks, on whose behalf, and in whose interests? It is crucial to ask whether trauma is being aestheticised or exploited, and whether a person's tragic experience is being reduced to an artistic "product." There is also the risk of institutional instrumentalisation of migration, whereby projects carried out under the banner of integration and solidarity serve to strengthen the public image of cultural institutions or to fulfil external normative and societal expectations — without any real redistribution of resources or structural change within the institutions themselves.

Another essential aspect is adherence to principles of care and non-violent interaction with individuals who have experienced displacement. In the implementation of artistic projects that engage with traumatic experience, it is vital to consider the risk of retraumatisation, particularly in intercultural contexts where local artists and curators collaborate with displaced artists. Unfortunately, in practice these principles are often sidelined in pursuit of more compelling or impactful outcomes.

It is also important to acknowledge the rapid shifts in the themes that capture public and institutional attention. Under conditions of perpetual crisis, we observe a high degree of reorientation, in which the concerns of certain groups lose visibility as soon as a new "urgent" agenda emerges. Such instability results in the fragmentation and short-term nature of many cultural initiatives.

An additional issue is the creation of a kind of migrant "ghetto" within the cultural sphere — a situation in which content is produced primarily for an internal audience, without the participation of members of the host society and sometimes even without basic translation into the host country's language. Such enclosedness reinforces isolation and hinders dialogue, and may also become a pretext for right-wing populist forces to construct anti-migration narratives appealing to the idea of an alleged "unwillingness to integrate." In this context, it is crucial to strive to move beyond one's own community and to create inclusive spaces of interaction.

Antonina Stebur: From your experience, which practices or approaches are most urgently needed today to foster more inclusive, feminist, and anti-racist responses to migration?

Maro Beburia: People often see migrants, including refugees, solely through the lens of their migrant identity, which is a precarious one, often temporary identity tied to trauma. Over time, it can become a core identity, but that depends on many factors. When you're viewed only through this narrow perspective, it can lead to alienation and a loss of self.

The solution is to engage with other parts of one's identity, those rooted in personal or work interests, hobbies, joys, and roles beyond migration. This broader perspective helps reconnect with the fuller self and fosters a sense of dignity and belonging. I believe the most valuable support we can offer people with migrant or refugee experience is to help nurture their sense of agency and independence.

Amilia Stanevich: Based on my experience, one of the key conditions for fostering a more inclusive approach to migration is the need to rethink and deconstruct existing institutional models of engagement with migrants. This concerns, first and foremost, a shift away from hierarchical and paternalistic practices toward horizontal forms of collaboration in which migrants are regarded not as objects of assistance but as full participants in cultural and social processes.

In migration contexts — particularly in cases of relocation from post-Soviet or Middle Eastern countries to Western European states — we observe a phenomenon of the erasure of pre-migration experience. Professional competences, social status, and cultural capital accumulated prior to migration often become invisible or unacknowledged within the new social and institutional environment. This can lead not only to professional marginalisation but also to a profound crisis of identity, which requires a rethinking of one's position within the new structure.

Antonina Stebur: What does "solidarity" mean in your work? How do you approach building sustainable, mutual forms of solidarity between migrant and non-migrant communities?

Maro Beburia: Solidarity is strongest during the first act of a crisis. But urgency fades, as a crisis becomes a permanent state. And solidarity fades.

It's crucial to build connections not only within Ukrainian communities but across shared struggles, with people from Belarus, Georgia, Iran, Palestine, and beyond. We're all constantly being put into boxes and forced into what we call the "genocide Olympics", fighting each other for media attention, humanitarian funding, and cultural grants, when in fact we should be building alliances, not competition.

For me, solidarity means shared responsibility. It's more than offering a room or a meal; it's speaking up against xenophobia and racism, and looking out for one another. True solidarity is found in everyday actions, not just in times of crisis, but in the long haul, as crises become a constant reality.

Advocacy work is like pushing Sisyphus' stone, but each effort matters. When we can no longer do it, someone else will pick it up, building on our work. That's why we must act together to make our voices louder and our impact stronger.

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