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Migrants, welfare and social citizenship in postcolonial Europe

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ABSTRACT

Welfare landscapes are key sites for the everyday enactment and negotiation of citizenship, but they have remained relatively marginal in debates about migrants' belonging in postcolonial Europe. Drawing on ethnographic studies of Egyptian migrant parents' engagements with the welfare state in Paris, Amsterdam and Milan, this paper examines how citizenship is enacted, negotiated and experienced in welfare encounters. In contrast to the racialised citizenship produced by public discourses and bordering institutions, such welfare encounters articulate a social citizenship built on the idea that all citizens and legalised residents have a right to social welfare. This social citizenship is worked out in concrete encounters that revolve around material provisions and assistance, which are often deeply personal and intimate. Such encounters do not transact abstract notions of the citizen but draw on dense ideas and valuations of good lives, roles, responsibilities and deservingness on the part of welfare actors and beneficiaries.

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Introduction

Amal, an Egyptian mother of three in her thirties, had been living in Milan for over a decade. Initially, her husband worked as a skilled factory worker and the couple had been able to buy a small apartment on the outskirts of Milan. After her husband lost his job, they could no longer keep up with the mortgage and in spring 2018 they were facing eviction. Amal worked for months to postpone the impending eviction of her family from their apartment, making repeated visits to the court office, social workers and the eviction centre.

On the morning of the planned eviction, Amal waited for the bailiff to come, while Lucrezia Botton and another Egyptian woman kept her company. The bailiff, a white Italian woman in her forties, confirmed her name and the composition of her family, and then proceeded to ask, 'Are you ready to move?'. Amal, dressed in what appeared

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to be pyjamas, replied firmly, 'No, we are not', her homey outfit speaking for itself. 'But you have to find a solution. Are you looking for a place?', the bailiff responded. 'Yes, we are looking, but no one wants to rent a house to a family with children'. The bailiff pressed on, 'If you are not evicted, you cannot obtain a social housing apartment. Anyway, today, I can't do anything because the police are not available. This notice gives you two months from now to leave the house'. As the bailiff took off, Amal's face relaxed, and she became more cheerful. Her husband came in from the other room and remarked, in a sarcastic tone, 'That was it? I had to take a day off for this?'

Postponing evictions is common in Italy. To Amal, this illustrated both the ongoing room for negotiating services in Italy, and the necessity of doing so. Until the eventual eviction, she remained convinced that social workers at the eviction centre in Milan would find a solution. Even though they had explained repeatedly that they were unable to help, Amal interpreted their dismissals as a strategy aimed at limiting excessive demands from applicants.

Despite her negotiation skills and institutional savvy, Amal was eventually evicted. She and her children were offered temporary housing in a group facility far from Milan. Her husband was expected to fend for himself. Amal was shocked and upset by the inability of the system to find a housing solution that suited her family's urgent needs. She wondered out loud how they could leave her and her children out in the street.

Experiences with a range of welfare provisions and actors are crucial to how people like Amal experience their social standing and national belonging in Europe. Yet, such experiences have received relatively scarce attention in work on migrant belonging and citizenship in Europe. In this paper, we build on and extend recent work that examines welfare provision as a site for the enactment of citizenship (de Koning, Johansen, and Marchesi 2022; Johansen and Grøn 2022; Larsen 2022; Lenehan 2022; Nordberg and Wrede 2015) by elaborating how welfare encounters shape migrants' sense of belonging and membership in the various European societies in which they have settled.

This focus on what is best captured by the term 'social citizenship', in line with what T.H. Marshall (1950) understood as social rights, has several implications for how we understand migrants' everyday citizenship in Europe today. First, while welfare services are part and parcel of border infrastructures, in the sense that most services exclude non-citizens and non-legalized residents, they also group together citizens and legal residents with and without migration backgrounds. As a result, it is often unclear if and how their migration background or ethnoracial otherness matters. Second, this everyday belonging and membership is in part produced in and through personal, intimate, positioned encounters with welfare actors, including not only civil servants and social professionals, but also volunteers. Welfare services and benefits are provided by classed, gendered, and raced individuals, with their convictions and commitments, who meet migrants who are similarly positioned and insert their own aims and logics. The social citizenship that is enacted is therefore far from impersonal, but must be understood as the negotiated outcome of two differently positioned and empowered actors. Our focus on parents shows that such forms of belonging and citizenship are hardly individual but are indelibly part of family projects. In Europe's increasingly devolved and fragmented welfare landscapes, such social citizenship may become even more opaque and disjunctive.

Below, we first position our intervention in current debates about migrants' experiences of citizenship in Europe. We then introduce the research on which we draw,

explore how our Egyptian interlocutors engage with European welfare states, and briefly discuss the three welfare landscapes they navigated. The rest of the paper examines welfare encounters as sites in which our interlocutors' sense of social citizenship was shaped.

Egyptian parents in postcolonial Europe

This paper draws on three-year-long ethnographic projects that followed how Egyptian migrant parents like Amal engaged with a range of welfare provisions and actors in Milan, Paris and Amsterdam. The parents we worked with were all born in Egypt and had moved to Europe at different moments in their lives. Most men had migrated to look for work, finding employ in various economic niches where fellow countrymen had already established themselves. Most women came to join their husbands. In their role as parents of future citizens, they encountered a new set of institutional actors and volunteers. We follow how these parents are positioned and position themselves as migrant citizens.

We explicitly understand these welfare encounters as situated in a postcolonial Europe. Understanding Europe as postcolonial invites an examination of the afterlives of the colonial in the present (Bhambra 2009; Hall 2002; Stoler 2011). A postcolonial lens helps us understand the contentious, anxious Europe of today, where growing ethnoracial diversity and racialised understandings of national society constitute an explosive political terrain (de Koning and Modest 2017; Lentin and Tittley 2011).

These mostly working-class Egyptian migrants make up a relatively new and relatively unknown ethnic niche next to other populations with North African backgrounds. In Paris, many parents looked up to the big postcolonial Moroccan, Algerian and Tunisian communities, and the way they have established themselves in France (Sayad 2004; Silverstein 2018). In Amsterdam, Egyptian parents often made use of Moroccan-Dutch infrastructures and facilities, but also sought to distance themselves from the deeply stigmatised Moroccan-Dutch community. In contrast to Paris and Amsterdam, in Milan, Egyptians made up one of the largest migrant populations.

Soukaina Chakkour's ethnographic research in Paris consisted of almost daily participation in the lives of four working class Muslim Egyptian families, and regular visits with a range of Egyptian men and women of different ages, and from different religious and class backgrounds. During his fieldwork in Amsterdam, Wiebe Ruijtenberg accompanied numerous Egyptian parents to their meetings with welfare professionals and other state agents, following the ups and downs of eight of them for over a year. He also frequented the weekly meetings of three Egyptian associations. Lucrezia Botton followed 25 Egyptian women as they carved out a space for themselves in a new social landscape and negotiated their relationship as mothers with the Italian welfare state.

Our interlocutors' expectations of citizenship in Europe were shaped by their experiences in Egypt and by Egyptian imaginations of European citizenship (de Koning 2009; Lenehan 2022; Schielke 2015; Sobhy 2021). They travelled and relocated with expectations that were expressed in an implicit comparison between Egyptian and European states. The constant comparison between what is here (in Egypt) and there (in the 'West', Europe/the US) shapes how they understand welfare. Nasser's Arab socialist project and the *infatih* policy that followed laid the foundation for ideas of social

rights and middle-class aspirations (Ikram 2018; de Koning 2009). Most Egyptians view social welfare services in Egypt as profoundly deficient since they do not live up to ideas about a functioning and caring state and do not approximate what are viewed as just and fair welfare systems of the 'West'. They do enjoy a robust regime of state-controlled rent, and many are deeply invested in working in the public sector because it offers permissive work conditions, long-term job security and pension benefits (Barsoum 2019).

Projects of migration are about securing a 'good life', which comes with a set of expectations that are closely linked to welfare services (Pettit and Ruijtenberg 2019; Schielke 2015). Our interlocutors' imaginations of high standards of social and legal standards in 'the West' or 'Europe' informs their claims on European states and welfare services, claims that often meet less lofty realities in their countries of destination. In Europe, these ideas further evolved with parents' cumulative experiences of state institutions and actors. As our case studies show, in navigating unwieldy, contradictory and unpredictable welfare landscapes, migrant parents rely on knowledge circulating among other migrant families, in waiting rooms, on school yards and in migrant or neighbourhood associations (see also Auyero 2011; Koch 2018; Tuckett 2018). These circulating knowledges shape their expectations, strategies, hopes and fears (Lenehan 2022).

Amal indeed demonstrated a steadfast belief in the forms of social protection and rights she could claim as a resident in a European country. Despite the limited resources of the Italian welfare state, many Egyptian mothers similarly held high expectations of what the state could offer and of its accountability towards all people in its territory. The Europe they conjured was not so much a concrete place or entity, but an imagined geography (Said 2003) and an object of desire to which they oriented themselves (De Genova 2016, 76; Schielke 2015). Like Amal, they envisioned European welfare states as 'caring' (Lenehan 2022) and as providing social security and protection, such as in the case of eviction.

This paper also draws on three additional ethnographic studies that focused on organisations that provide parenting support and other services for parents and families in each of these cities.¹ In the turn to what we analysed as 'intimate' governance, a landscape of participative projects and empowering activities was brought into being within, and parallel to, welfare services, but this often peripheral landscape did not match parents' daily endeavours and concerns.

The welfare landscapes that these parents encountered differed considerably. In Milan, welfare funds and decision-making were devolved to regional and municipal levels and responsibilities were outsourced to non-profit and private entities, leading to the growth of the non-profit sector (Maino and Neri 2011; Naldini and Saraceno 2008). An always partial welfare state reliant on the family and its heavily gendered division of labour was further weakened and fragmented (Ferrera 1996). The comparatively extensive Dutch welfare state also saw the devolution of responsibility for various welfare domains from the national to the municipal level, a transformation that was accompanied by budget cutbacks. This transformation was portrayed as an occasion to reinvent the welfare state in a more collaborative and horizontal one, positioned nearby in the neighbourhood, and starting from the needs and strengths of parents and children (Duyvendak and Tonkens 2018). Finally, although welfare in France has become more conditional (Dubois 2014), the welfare state has not undergone restructuring to the degree that we see in Italy and the Netherlands. Attempts to 'modernize' and

‘democratize’ institutions are instead intimately tied to a widespread sense that the republic is in ‘crisis’. The crisis of the Republic has been projected onto the multi-ethnic banlieues (Chabal 2015), sparking a broad set of policy interventions that seek to promote ‘participation’ and modernise government, including by leaning more heavily on the work of local associations (Nicholls 2006; Tissot 2007).

Social citizenship through welfare

The way migrants negotiate and enact citizenship in and through welfare has received relatively little attention. Studies of citizenship in postcolonial Europe often prioritise public and political debates and integration or civic enculturation policies (Lentin and Titley 2011; Schinkel 2017). Others focus on border and immigration bureaucracies and humanitarian provisioning for illegalised migrants and refugees (Borrelli and Andreetta 2019; Geoffrion and Cretton 2021; Ticktin 2011). These can be seen as bordering institutions, which police entry and inclusion into national territories, not only at national borders, but also within them. Public discourses and bordering institutions have in common that they explicitly target those categorised as different and in need of integration into the national body politic (Schinkel 2018).

Public discourses, policies and programmes that outline the nation by explicitly naming and excluding others in racialised ethnic or religious terms are indeed prevalent in our research sites across Europe. They provide the political backdrop to the lives of people who, like our Egyptian migrant interlocutors, are often understood to be non-European, other, outsider, but they tell us little of the everyday enactments of inclusion and exclusion they experience, or their experiences of citizenship.

Even if welfare services loom large in more ethnographic accounts of migrant families’ lives, until recently, few migration scholars studied them as key sites in which migrant citizenship is negotiated. In their recent special issue on kinship and state relatedness, Johansen and Grøn (2022, 5) focus on the way ‘state-based politics, policies or discourses of belonging are intimately enfolded into everyday practices in homes, neighborhoods or institutional spaces’. Nordberg and Wrede (2015, 54) coin the term ‘citizenisation’ to capture ‘the interplay between migrants’ negotiations and acts of citizenship ... and the normative practices of (welfare) state incorporation played out in street-level encounters’. They conceptualise this as an ‘embodied engagement that is located in material surroundings that involve both semi-institutionalised and institutionalised settings infused by the larger socio-political context’ (Nordberg and Wrede 2015, 55).

Welfare provisions and services are important sites for the enactment and experiences of citizenship for all people, but this holds even more true for migrant parents who read such encounters as proof of their standing in the countries where they have settled. The rearing of children is of central importance to parents, who devote much time, energy and resources to realise their hopes and expectations with regards to the future of their children and families (Feldman-Savelsberg 2017; Larsen 2022). State and nonstate organisations are also invested in the new generation of citizens and see the safeguarding of the well-being of child-citizens as central to their mission (de Koning, Johansen, and Marchesi 2022; Gilliam and Gulløv 2017; Knijn and Van Nijmegen 2011; Lee et al. 2014). When people become parents, they are thus drawn into a range of interactions on account of their children: public health, education and family services assist in the

upbringing of children; these services also monitor families. Institutional and professional notions of social rights, norms and obligations meet the expectations of parents, often under the umbrella of what is best for the child.

Often, parents have no choice but to interact with a range of institutional actors, who interpellate them as parents and guardians of future citizens. This is certainly true for poorer, non-white parents who rely more heavily on public and welfare services (Johansen and Grøn 2022). These parents may be called in and monitored more frequently and insistently because of the potential risks they are seen to present (Veltkamp and Brown 2017). These are unequal encounters, where institutional power is often bolstered by raced and classed hierarchies (Dubois 2010). How migrant parents like our interlocutors navigated and negotiated welfare landscapes therefore provides a fertile entrance for research into being and belonging in postcolonial Europe.

Social citizenship is negotiated in a wide range of settings: schools, welfare offices, community centres and hospitals. We found that the most significant in this respect were not institutions involved in the distribution of welfare benefits, but rather sites and organisations offering welfare services. Distinct from the welfare office, this often entailed highly personal, intimate, and at times long-term relations between welfare actors and participants (Vollebergh, de Koning, and Marchesi 2021). Schools were particularly central: parents saw them as the major avenue through which their children's futures could be secured or impaired (Delay 2011; Larsen 2022; Thin 2009). Schools were also major access points for other welfare services, and sites through which families were monitored and through which they encountered various citizenship agendas (de Koning, Koster, and Jaffe 2015). They therefore occupy a central place in this paper.

Welfare providers employ their own parameters and logics in their enactment of social citizenship. They often mean to serve all citizens and legalised residents, but administer a population marked by racialised hierarchies. While equal treatment of citizens is a core bureaucratic value, in welfare and social provisioning evaluations of need and deservingness are also important. These are not about equality per se, but about differentiating in a fair way in relation to need (Koch 2021). Such ethics may be different again in devolved and fragmented welfare landscapes, which may, for instance, introduce an ethic of empowerment and logics of horizontality and proximity, or foreground charity and gift giving rather than a framework of public assistance and social rights (Muehlebach 2012; Rozakou 2016; Vollebergh, de Koning, and Marchesi 2021).

Notions of equality or citizenship have been elaborated as part of the development of liberal democracies in the age of empire (Mehta 1999; Mills 2017). Due to the colonial context in which the welfare state was conceived, racialised structures of deservingness have been engrained in its makeup (Bhambra and Holmwood 2018; Lyons 2009). The welfare state was, moreover, developed in deeply gendered ways, as failsafe for nuclear families headed by a male breadwinner (Koch 2015; Lister 2012). Consequently, although welfare encounters are often framed in universalist, generic terms, they carry subtexts of gender, class and race (Bregnbæk 2022; de Koning and Ruijtenberg 2022; Padovan-Özdemir and Øland 2022; Roux, Purenne, and Talpin 2023).

In turn, migrant parents like Amal lay claim to a right to care and to a modicum of social security provided by the nation-state (Lenehan 2022). They elaborate a social contract: ‘a set of expectations and assumptions about how state-society relations *should* be, and a discursive and conceptual framework through which people interpret their lived experiences as meeting or failing to meet those standards’ (Burnyeat and Johansson 2022; emphasis in original). For many parents, the nation-state, France, the Netherlands, or Italy figured as an active interlocutor that could be invoked and interpellated, even if it often let them down.

For many migrant parents, the substance of their citizenship materialises in encounters with welfare actors, which reveal their place in Europe, both in terms of their standing as part of society, and as subjects of the welfare state (de Koning, Johansen, and Marchesi 2022). Such contexts tell parents what they can expect from state and other welfare actors, what is expected of them, and what their obligations are. Such encounters convey, in short, whether the state or society ‘cares’ for them and whether they can partake in the social contract.

Engaging institutions

Being a parent brought many of our migrant interlocutors in repeated, close contact with a range of welfare institutions and actors. Such encounters exhorted them to act as citizens and parents responsible for future citizens. Especially for migrant parents who were less comfortable with the national language, and less familiar with their rights and obligations and the working of various welfare institutions, such performative requirements could be challenging.

As our opening vignette illustrates, it was mainly the mothers who dealt with such actors and institutional requirements, since their husbands often worked long hours. For some women, this was a challenge, but many felt it also represented an important contribution to the household and took pride in their ability to handle such bureaucratic challenges and to adroitly navigate complex bureaucratic and welfare landscapes. This was certainly the case for Rawan.

Rawan came to Paris from Cairo to join her husband in 2004. She soon discovered she would have to take on an active role in managing relations with a variety of institutional actors. ‘No one will do your things for you in France; only you can do them’, she recalled. Rawan took French classes four times a week when she arrived. Though she was not fully fluent, Rawan could handle herself well when she had to converse in French. Her schedule was always packed. She asserted with some pride that, besides being a mother and housewife, ‘I am the one who takes care of all the bureaucracy in the house. I can do it better than my husband, who has been here much longer than me’. To Rawan, her effectiveness at taking care of bureaucracy was one of her most important achievements in Paris.

The mother of a teenage son, Rawan was often called in by the school to discuss problems or difficulties. This time, her son, Hisham, had gotten into a fight after he reprimanded one of his classmates for cheating. He took a blow to the chest, which was particularly problematic because he suffers from asthma. Rawan asked the vice-principal for a meeting to discuss the incident, and invited Soukaina Chakkour along.

In a gloomy office full of *dossiers* on the third floor of the school, Rawan sat down assertively in front of the tall, blond vice-principal. The school official, who was aware that French was not Rawan's first language, did not appear to make any effort to slow the pace of the conversation. The vice-principal spoke hastily about the incident:

I don't know where they acquire the aggressive attitude and the bad language. The parents insist it's not from them, and I am certain our teachers do not use these methods, so the school and the parents are very confused about the origins of this behaviour.

Rawan was not convinced. She reminded the vice-principal of a previous incident two months ago when her son came home with a broken hand after a fight. She insisted on what she saw as a simple and basic point: when parents send their children to school, they 'expect that their children come back to them in one piece'. The vice-principal nodded in agreement and promised to follow up on the matter and question the teachers in order to avoid similar incidents in the future.

Outside, Rawan asked Soukaina to explain specific words that the vice-principal used to refer to school rules and regulations, to make sure she understood everything. This was not Rawan's first meeting with school officials concerning similar problems, and she had learned that such conversations take on more or less the same form. Even without fully grasping the nuances of the vice-principal's language, she knew in advance roughly how the conversation would unfold and could divine what the vice-principal was saying.

The repetitive nature of encounters with teachers and other welfare actors made it possible for Rawan and other Egyptian mothers to speculate rather accurately about what was said. To an extent, this ability helped them manage their negotiations with school: it boosted their confidence and endowed them with a sense of legitimacy in front of institutions they often did not fully understand. At the same time, these mothers worried that if only their French were better, they could communicate with institutions more efficiently. Even Rawan, who was comparatively fluent in French and in navigating such institutional encounters, left these meetings uncertain about her ability to advocate effectively for her son.

These mothers tried to allay their fears of not being 'good enough' for their kids through tactics of active and persistent participation in school-related affairs. Despite an occasionally hostile institutional environment and her limited resources, for instance in terms of language mastery, Rawan participated actively in her children's school life, and would defend them fiercely whenever necessary. And in order to enhance her capacities in dealing with institutions such as the school, Rawan avidly sought out information from other migration-background families who were more established in Paris, such as those from Marghrebi communities.

For women like Rawan, the double burden of raising children who could live up to expectations of French institutions and those of kin and community in Paris and their country of origin, often left them feeling ambiguous about their place in France (Chakkour and de Koning 2023). Rawan dutifully participated in her children's life in the hope of raising children who would not experience second-class citizenship or feel they didn't belong. Her efforts were often hampered by a complex and uncooperative institutional environment that was dismissive of her efforts. Despite experiencing such hurdles, Rawan persisted. She always went into such institutional encounters in a determined fashion, with a strong conviction that 'this is the country of rights' and it was up to her to get them.

Rawan shares her difficulty in understanding school code and of establishing herself as a legitimate actor within the school with other working class and non-French speaking parents (Delay 2011; Thin 2009). Many working-class, migrant background and non-white families see their relations to schools as a mirror of their relationship with the state (Barrault-Stella and Bongrand 2020). The relationship between parents and the school system is a constant object of political and social concern and policy interventions (Giuliani and Payet 2014; Monceau 2014). What is specific to migrant parents like Rawan is that they always worry, but are never sure, whether their treatment at school is shaped by their relative lack of knowledge of the school system or whether it is the result of racial prejudice.

Claiming social citizenship

Welfare encounters often revolve around the material accruals of social citizenship, those things needed 'to live the life of a civilized being according to the standards prevailing in the society' (Marshall 1950, 8). The parents we followed often understood them to be about their standing as (migrant) citizens or residents, and about the care and disciplinary involvement they could expect from the state.

Amsterdam's many Egyptian organisations provided parents with a space to share their welfare experiences, exchange insights and discuss strategies. At a weekly coffee morning at an Egyptian organisation in Amsterdam attended by Wiebe Ruijtenberg in the spring of 2017, a discussion unfolded among seven mothers about discrimination in the Dutch education system. Ilham, a divorced mother of three, told the story of her fourteen-year-old son. The boy had been doing well, but a year ago he had started getting in trouble in school and even with the police, and now his school's care coordinator wanted to send him to a school for children with special behavioural needs. Ilham tried to convince the care coordinator to look for a solution within their school, but so far, her attempts seemed futile. 'You see how they are treating us', she said, time again. Some other women nodded, but others seemed less convinced.

Carefully weighing her words, one of Ilham's close friends suggested that there might not be much the school could do. Apparently encouraged, another friend said that Ilham's son had become quite unruly, and that Ilham should find a way to keep her son away from bad friends, and discipline him into focusing on school. 'But how can we discipline our children if there is no discipline in school?', another woman asked, evoking the widely shared belief that Dutch educators did not do enough to instil a sense of respect for elders in children. Other mothers were more pragmatic. 'Maybe change schools', one suggested. 'Or send him to his uncles in Egypt, who will discipline him', another woman said. 'But he is born here, his future is here. He deserves a school that serves him well', Ilham protested. 'Yes, just go there, and tell them they are racist', another woman said, raising laughter. 'But seriously, what should I do?' Ilham asked, but the conversation had already drifted to other topics.

The Egyptian parents Wiebe Ruijtenberg worked with wanted their children to do well in school. This led them to be interested in welfare services that could help their children, like speech therapy or funding for laptops, while they feared the services that could side-track them, most notably the schools for children with special learning or behavioural needs, which parents perceived as a dead-end, even though teachers and welfare

professionals presented them as places that were better suited to children like Ilham's son. The question was how to attract the right kind of welfare services and professionals, and how to avoid the wrong ones.

Like these women, parents who suspected discriminatory treatment found such discrimination hard to ascertain, let alone prove. They, instead, asked themselves what others would do. The tactics and strategies proposed by Ilham were common practice. Mohamed sent his two sons to a publicly funded Islamic primary school, not necessarily because he wanted his children to receive an Islamic education but rather because he felt his sons' teachers would take him more serious as a father. Heba sent her daughter and son to an expensive private school for the same reason. Mirvat, a mother of two, named her two sons Ryan and Adam, which are both Dutch and Egyptian names, and intentionally adopted the Dutch way of writing these names. In sharp contrast, other parents, including Ilham, categorically refused to adopt these strategies and tactics, arguing that changing names or schools was akin to accepting a second-rate citizenship.

In addition to these tactics and strategies, Egyptian mothers and fathers in Amsterdam tried to encourage welfare actors to take good care of their children. Mothers tried to cultivate a sense of intimacy with professionals to gain their empathy, which they hoped would benefit their children, while concealing aspects of their private lives that made them susceptible to more forceful interventions. This meant trying to develop close ties with professionals, while also maintaining a strategic distance. Mothers (and fathers) were particularly keen to conceal signs of domestic violence, which would trigger the involvement of child protection services and could ultimately lead to a child being placed in a foster home.

For fathers, developing friendly ties was less easy, in part because they were less involved in everyday parenting and in part because they felt more distance to professionals, who were predominantly young, white middle-class women. Instead, fathers stepped in when they or their wives felt that they had to take a more forceful stance vis-à-vis professionals to 'take their rights', as some put it. Some fathers were indeed quite forceful, but few would explicitly mention racism or discrimination during meetings. Parents felt that race talk in front of professionals was taboo and feared that sharing their suspicions would have unwanted repercussions.

The encounters that ensued were instead marked by a discursive emphasis on the child's best interest. Sometimes, parents and professionals did find each other on this shared ground. They both saw education as the primary way to a meaningful career, and thus a better future, and they both felt that good school results signified that children were on the right path. However, if children did not appear to follow that path, parents and professionals rarely agreed on the best way to get children back on track. Parents often wanted their children's teachers to spend more time with their children and to discipline them more. In turn, teachers, and other professionals urged parents to help their children with their schoolwork or suggested testing children as a way forward.

Parents were unsure about these tests. On the one hand, they felt the tests indicated they were not to blame for their children's troubles, and they hoped that they would help their children. On the other hand, they also feared that they would be used to relegate their children to the margins of the education system, and thus the labour market, and wondered whether professionals were actually trying to get rid of their children. Parents were reluctant to openly disagree with professionals, but in the rare cases they

did, professionals would simply repeat more adamantly that they were working in the child's best interest.

These stories indicate that claiming social citizenship was a struggle. Even if these parents were nominally treated like other citizens, many feared theirs was in fact a second-rate citizenship. In a context dominated by deeply racialised public debates, where ethnoracial identifications were used to explain a wide variety of social problems, many welfare institutions adhered to an approach that was pointedly colour-blind (de Koning and Ruijtenberg 2022). They elaborated a universalist project that foregrounded an ethics of equality. This universal framework was matched by a professional ethical commitment to treating people as individuals, rather than representatives of their 'background'. Yet, that universalist project was shadowed by raced subtexts and reproduced an unspoken white middle-class Dutchness, both in the norms it conveyed and in the type of professional it assumed (de Koning and Ruijtenberg 2022; cf. Padovan-Özdemir and Øland 2022). While parents suspected various forms of institutional racism, addressing them was especially hard because it ran counter to professionals' ethical commitment to non-racism.

The elusive racism that many Egyptian parents in Amsterdam experienced shaped how they evoked and enacted social citizenship. They insisted that their children should benefit from the Dutch education system and welfare services like other Dutch children. At the same time, they knew that equal treatment was not a given, and they instead had to take their rights. By doing so, they enacted a social citizenship against the grain of racialised exclusions (see also Larsen 2022), and thereby actively contest exclusionary framings of citizenship. Even if they did so in understated ways and in mundane settings, their claims are no less political manner than the high-profile contentious claims to European citizenship that Engin Isin (2013) analyses.

Claiming that social citizenship was not an easy feat. Welfare actors' deep commitment to a colour-blind approach made discussing possible discrimination very risky (Wekker 2016). Parents thus resorted to a tactics of involving certain organisations and not others, and building warm relations with professionals they felt might be sympathetic and conducive to their family's situation. This meant that they sometimes enacted a second-class citizenship, as they opted to change their ways, their children's names and their schools in order to make sure their children would get their rights.

Disjunctive experiences

Across Europe, the provision of welfare is increasingly delegated to assemblages of state and non-state actors, professionals and volunteers, which are supposed to facilitate welfare services and social programmes and activate recipients, rather than simply providing for them (Muehlebach 2012; Newman and Tonkens 2011). This is both a consequence of budget cuts, and part of a welfare agenda we dubbed 'intimate welfare', which was meant to provide welfare in more accessible, human-centred forms that would also be better tailored to the needs of a diverse population. This better, leaner welfare state would, moreover, be cost-efficient (Vollebergh, de Koning, and Marchesi 2021).

Such welfare assemblages were present in all three cities. However, the Italian welfare state went furthest in devolving welfare responsibilities and outsourcing them to non-

profit and private entities (Maino and Neri 2011). Non-profit third sector actors were celebrated, as in the words of the president of the National Center for Volunteering, as ‘relational entrepreneurs’ who animate a new, more intimate welfare (Marchesi 2022, 364).

The cultivation of relationality and the stimulation of ‘active citizens’ was not only a means to privatise the state, but also an attempt to govern an increasingly diverse society. Professional and volunteer organisations were particularly active in neighbourhoods with substantial migrant populations. The ambition of the new relational welfare was to rebuild social solidarity from the neighbourhood, bringing residents together to recognise common problems and hopes across differences, in the process identifying shared solutions precisely targeted to local needs (Marchesi 2021). In this transformed welfare landscape, third sector organisations were expected to work the magic of relational welfare and heal a fraying social fabric.

The Egyptian women followed by Lucrezia Botton spent a lot of time navigating a fragmented and variegated landscape that combined welfare and charity. The difficult economic situation in Italy since 2008 had severely affected many Egyptian families, forcing them to look for any job opportunity and turn to all possible sources of support, from public forms of welfare, such as child benefits, to private and charitable organisations. Whereas fathers were occupied with an at times frenetic search for jobs, mothers learnt to navigate a complex welfare landscape and to make sense of how it directs economic support to families. In order to provide for the needs of their children, they learned how to access state institutions for information, benefits and services, and consequentially they improved their linguistic skills and knowledge of the city.

Many of these women had fallen on hard times, as their husbands lost their stable income in the context of the economic crisis. These mothers were invested in limiting their daily expenses. They often relied on charity organisations, like local churches, to obtain used clothes or primary goods such as flour, pasta, rice, sugar, and soaps. The circuit of charities was part of what Egyptian mothers saw as a diffuse welfare system. They did not differentiate between religious institutions and the state’s welfare, as services and provisions often seemed to overlap. For example, many religious institutions offered medical services that the national health system does not provide free of charge, like dental care for adults. In addition, churches often relied on regulations and documents that the government issued to identify the genuinely disadvantaged families. State papers, therefore, legitimised who was eligible for help within religious institutions. Moreover, as Selma’s story below illustrates, church-related and other charities often reproduced state-like forms of organisations in their distribution of provisions and services (see also Douzina-Bakalaki 2021 on Greece). Such state-like bureaucracies and performances thus blended with those of official state or public services.

On a morning in May 2017, researcher Lucrezia Botton accompanied Selma on her usual busy schedule. By 9:30 Selma had to drop off her youngest child at the kindergarten, which was far from her home, and by 10:00 she had to be at a meeting at Becoming Parents, a private, pro-life family counselling centre located in downtown Milan and subsidised by the Lombardy regional government. Selma was pregnant with her fourth child, which came as a surprise to her, since she had taken contraceptive measures.

Selma lived in a neighbourhood at the periphery of the city. To Selma, the neighbourhood and the connections she had been able to build there were crucial resources. She had become acquainted with many Arab and Italian mothers through interactions at her children's elementary school, in language classes, parents' meetings, celebrations and festivities. She met other Arab mothers on a daily basis in the streets and in cafés that local Egyptians recognised as respectable places for women to visit. The women talked, shared worries and helped one another when necessary. They also shared key information about new benefits, resources made available by charitable organisations, employment orientation programmes, or where and from whom to obtain help with bureaucratic procedures.

At her children's school, Selma had taken Italian language classes and she now attended a 'meeting space' for mothers. She also participated in the numerous celebrations and social events organised by the school association. Her contacts in the neighbourhood and school had taught her how to navigate the city and how to interact with state institutions. Through her neighbourhood contacts Selma learned of the Becoming Parents programme, which offered material support and counselling to pregnant women, as well as help with applying for the family bonus – a state subsidy.

Otherwise a very confident woman, when Selma spoke Italian, she would become unsure. Shortly after she arrived at the Becoming Parents centre, she was received by Bianca, an elderly volunteer with a rather harsh demeanour, whom she had met many times before. As always, Bianca wrote down some basic information: Selma's age, the composition of her family, her children's ages and husband's occupation. Selma did not object, even though she was asked to provide the exact same information at each of her monthly appointments. After these formalities, Bianca asked Selma in a disappointed tone: 'Why didn't you attend class last month?', referring to the childbirth preparation course in which Selma was enrolled. Participation in the course was a condition of eligibility for the six-month supply of diapers provided by the centre.

Selma knew from the outset that she would be unable to attend. She had to look after her three kids and her husband worked long hours. Bianca scolded her: 'I don't understand why you don't want to learn when we offer you the opportunity', and threatened to withhold the diaper supply. Although Selma had good reasons not to attend the course, not least because she had already given birth three times, she remained silent. When the meeting ended, she felt relieved. Bianca had said she would probably grant the supply of diapers after all. But since the discussion of participation in the childbirth course had taken up all the time, Selma never had an opportunity to ask how to apply for the family bonus.

In their navigation of the social landscape in Milan, mothers like Selma encountered many professionals and volunteers who encouraged them to become more autonomous, independent and engaged. Some of the educational opportunities they provided, as in the case of the family centre, ignored women's actual situation and needs, and required something in return, such as participation in their projects. Such calls to become active citizens were especially directed at people like our interlocutors, as Arab, Muslim mothers and housewives. Many felt that calls were very demanding and contradicted their already packed schedules and responsibilities as mothers.

In a landscape of scarce resources, Egyptian mothers' activities included having to negotiate programmes such as the pro-life family centre, where some volunteers like Bianca addressed them in paternalistic and condescending ways while they mediated

access to critical state resources. For some mothers, being scolded by welfare actors for being unable to attend a course or a meeting was just annoying; they learned to put up with it. For Selma, it became a matter of personal estrangement. She complained of feeling unaccepted and judged unfairly, possibly because of her being Egyptian.

Discussion and conclusion

For migrant parents like our interlocutors, encounters in the context of social welfare are key moments where the meaning of being and belonging in Europe is worked out beyond the overly racialised narratives of national belonging familiar from public debates. This is where our interlocutors learned what their standing and rights in society were, and where they articulated their own claims of citizenship. Yet, with most scholarly attention directed at public debates or policies and bureaucracies invested in policing external and internal borders of the nation, these sites have received relatively little attention. This article explores the implications of a focus on welfare landscapes as sites where, for many migrant families, the substance of their citizenship is enacted and negotiated.

The social citizenship enacted in welfare landscapes differs from citizenship that is articulated in other settings. It is unlike formal legal citizenship, a bridge to cross, or the racialised, culturalised citizenship articulated in public debates and civic integration policies (Duyvendak, Geschiere, and Tonkens 2016; Schinkel 2018). It is also not a bottom-up citizenship claimed against the grain by migrant actors (Erel and Reynolds 2018). Instead, the social citizenship we analyse is articulated in welfare encounters that combine the provision of social rights and universalising forms of address and ethics with racialised hierarchies and concerns.

Welfare institutions are officially tasked with providing care and assistance to all citizens, a duty that often extends to residents as well. Rather than a reproduction of difference, such institutions start from universalising and generic terms. Yet, often, such organisations also work with more implicit racialised assumptions and hierarchies about who needs care, who is at risk or risky. Parents were often unsure whether and how their migrant backgrounds and ethnoracial difference mattered. For the migrant parents we worked with, accessing social and care services, as well as education and housing, were crucial signs of their citizenship status. Parents wondered how to make sense of not receiving a service or benefit, or feeling that they do not receive equal treatment. This led to a constant uncertainty about their inclusion in the social contract and questions as to whether the barriers or difficulties they encountered were related to their migrant status and/or ethnoracial difference.

This social citizenship was elaborated in highly personalised, yet unequal encounters, often between white middle-class female professionals and non-white working-class migrant mothers, at the intersection of professional and personal lives and social worlds. It was built less on abstract notions of the citizen than on ideas concerning good family lives and good futures for children, and the best ways to guarantee them, including roles and responsibilities of parents and the state (Johansen and Louise 2022). These encounters thus revolved around gendered ideas and practices regarding family responsibilities, parenting et cetera, on the part of welfare actors *and* of parents (Marchesi 2021; van den Berg and Duyvendak 2012). Despite the frequent use of gender-neutral terms (parents), these programmes were deeply gendered in practice, reinstituting the gendered nature

of citizenship of the early welfare state (Lister 2012). It is also striking that this was not an individual citizenship, but one conceived in a relational manner pertaining to individuals as part of families. This citizenship was a family project.

Mindful of their power, many welfare institutions and programmes tried to create collaborative and trusting relations, especially with populations that were considered hard-to-reach. Yet, despite ideas of activating parents and developing collaborative relations between welfare actors and families, actual welfare encounters were often characterised by deeply unequal communication and decision making. This often made these meetings one-sided encounters, where parents tried to perform well to the citizenship agendas of the institutions and organisations they encountered.

Migrant parents, in turn, tried to claim social citizenship despite the shadow of discriminatory treatment, which many felt to be ever-present, but hard to pin-down. The minutiae of social citizenship were frequently discussed in community centres, waiting rooms and social associations, where tips about how to navigate and negotiate various institutions were exchanged. Attempts to claim social citizenship on the part of migrant parents could end in frustration when institutions failed to live up to imagined social contracts and the promises of social citizenship they held out. Especially in Amsterdam, parents who held high hopes of the Dutch welfare state felt that they were not treated equally to white Dutch (and more implicitly middle-class) citizens. They, however, had a hard time confirming such concerns, and even more so voicing them.

In Europe's increasingly devolved welfare landscapes, social citizenship becomes deeply disjunctive, contradictory and erratic as it is articulated in heterogeneous and fragmented ways, where lines between public accountability and private charity, social rights and voluntary outreach are blurred. In these ambiguous, opaque and unpredictable welfare landscapes, families who had to rely on welfare to survive and thrive were regularly left disillusioned and stranded.

Note

1. These studies were conducted by Vollebergh (Paris), de Koning (Amsterdam) and Marchesi (Milan) (see Chakkour and de Koning 2023; de Koning, Johansen, and Marchesi 2022; de Koning and Ruijtenberg 2022; Marchesi 2021; 2022; Vollebergh 2022; Vollebergh, de Koning, and Marchesi 2021). All six studies were part of the Reproducing Europe project, led by Anouk de Koning. The project has been reviewed by Radboud University's Ethics Committee Social Sciences (25 August 2015), the European Research Council Executive Agency ethics team (28 september 2015), and Leiden University's Ethics Review Committee of the Social Sciences (14-10-2020).

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