**Women in the migrant economy.**

**A *positional* approach to contextualise gendered transnational trajectories**

**Abstract**

Drawing on the life histories of migrant women entrepreneurs in the Netherlands and Spain, this article explores the influence of transnational trajectories on their social positions and business strategies. A *translocational positionality* (Anthias 2002, 2008) enables us to research the transnational strategies of women entrepreneurs more effectively in addition to examining the changes in social positions and gendered identities between the country of origin and the country of destination. This approach contributes to scholarship on ‘context’ by offering a transnational gendered dimension in relation to the effects of social, spatial, and institutional factors. Our findings demonstrate how female migrant entrepreneurs redefine their social status in different contexts by establishing a business and challenge, contest or comply with gender relations in their transnational entrepreneurial journeys.

**Keywords:** entrepreneurship, women, ethnicity, migration, gender, positionality, transnationalism.

**Introduction**

This paper uses a translocational positionality approach (Anthias 2002, 2008) to understand the business strategies of female migrant entrepreneurs[[1]](#footnote-1) in relation to context (Welter 2011; Welter, Brush and de Bruin 2014). Connecting the migrant minority entrepreneurship literature (Kloosterman 2010; Jones et al. 2014) with feminist scholarship (Phizacklea 1988: Hillman 1999; Essers and Benschop 2007; Essers and Benschop 2009; Essers et al. 2010; Villares-Varela forthcoming), we propose a *positionality* approach to enhance our understanding of the transnational (Vertovec 2004) trajectories of migrant women entrepreneurs.

While scholarship studying migrant enterprises has focused on the drivers and outcomes of this type of labour incorporation, feminist scholarship has examined the specific experiences of women in the migrant economy (Essers and Benschop 2007; Essers et al. 2010; - for a detailed review see Villares-Varela et al. 2017). However, this body of research tends to be circumscribed by specific national boundaries and lacks contextualised insights into the transnational experiences of female migrant entrepreneurs. The complexities arising from a transnational approach reinforce the importance of ‘context’ in research on entrepreneurship by offering a gendered transnational dimension to it. Fayolle et al. (2015) accentuated the need for a ‘contextualised’ approach to study women entrepreneurs, given the crucial role of historical context in shaping the hierarchies that condition the processes and outcomes in which women are embedded. The core contributions to the studies of ‘context’ (Welter 2011; Zahra, Wright, and Abdelgawad 2014) have stressed the importance of social, institutional and spatial factors. This focus is particularly challenging when studying female migrant entrepreneurs: their lived experiences relate to a multiplicity of contexts (e.g., country of origin and destination), contradictory social positions (e.g., different class positions in the countries of origin and destination), and shifting references in terms of gender ideologies.

Departing from intersectionality (Crenshaw 1991; Holvino 2010; Cho, Crenshaw and McCall 2013), a positionality approach helps to understand the transnational character of women’s entrepreneurial strategies and the transformation of their social positions in time and space. This transnational perspective responds to the call by Metcalfe and Woodham (2012) for more research on the implications of the variability of social identities across time and space (Metcalfe and Woodham 2012, 133) and on integrating accounts on the gendered geographies of power (Mahler and Pessar 2001) into management studies.

Drawing on the life histories of migrant entrepreneurs from Latin American and Turkey in Spain and the Netherlands respectively, this paper illustrates (i) the entrepreneurial strategies that migrant women utilise in a transnational space; (ii) the transformation of social and (iii) gendered positions between the country of origin and the destination. This article’s theoretical contribution is threefold: first, the article contributes to contextualising the experiences of women in a multiplicity of contexts (spatial and temporal). Second, the paper enhances the mixed embeddedness approach by addressing the overlooked gendered structures that shape women’s work in the migrant economy[[2]](#footnote-2) and showing these women’s agency. Finally, it refines intersectionality theory by considering shifting social positions in time and space.

This paper is structured as follows: the next section concerns how the literature on migrant entrepreneurship has overlooked gendered structures, approaches from feminist scholarship and the question of transnationalism. After that, the concept of translocational positionality to examine the relational and power dimensions of different variables in time and space will be elaborated. We then discuss the methodology, followed by the findings section, which showcases how translocational positionality helps analysing the entrepreneurial strategies and social positions of female migrant entrepreneurs. Finally, the article discusses the findings and their theoretical implications, followed by conclusions.

**Contextualising transnationalism and the social positions of migrant women entrepreneurs**

In an era of increased mobility identified as the ‘age of migration’ (Castles, de Haas, and Miller 2014), women compose half of the international migrants worldwide (UN-OECD 2013). Migrants largely participate in the labour market of their destination countries as employees, but also play a significant role as entrepreneurs, creating on average 1.8 jobs in the OECD countries and with higher overall self-employment rates than nationals (OECD 2011). Migrant women also engage in business ownership, either as the sole entrepreneur or as contributor to family business ventures. However, traditional immigrant entrepreneurship literature has rarely considered the gendered social structures that shape migrant entrepreneurship (Essers and Benschop 2007; Essers and Benschop 2009; Essers et al. 2010; Villares-Varela forthcoming). The *mixed embeddedness* approach (Kloosterman 2010) adds a much needed sensitivity to context and to the constraining and enabling character of social structures; however, this approach overlooks the fundamental classed, gendered and racialised incorporation of migrants (Ram et al. 2017; Villares-Varela et al. 2017).

Scholarly research emphasising the importance of ‘context’ maintains that considering context allows us to grasp the effects of the social, spatial and institutional factors on entrepreneurship (Welter 2011; Zahra, Wright, and Abdelgawad, 2014; Fayolle et al. 2015). Such accounts understand context as both facilitating and constraining entrepreneurship (Welter 2011) and ought to incorporate the specificities of spatial, institutional and social embeddedness in which gender norms hold sway (Welter, Brush, and de Bruin 2014). As rightly noted by Welter, Brush and de Bruin (2014), gender roles are embedded in specific contexts and may prescribe entrepreneurial behaviour. These authors highlighted how, for example, for migrant women more traditional gender norms from their countries of origin may affect their entrepreneurial behaviour in their destination countries in which the women must navigate different social settings (*ibid*). Nonetheless, extant accounts conceptualise context confined to particular national/local boundaries and do not consider its transnational nature.

*Deconstructing transnational trajectories for women entrepreneurs*

Feminist scholarship has emphasised the ‘gender-blindness’ of migrant entrepreneurship when analysing the nature of the migration processes in supplying a female labour force to work in addition to the gendered nature of work and employment in these firms (Phizacklea 1998; Westwood 1988; Hillman 1999). Literature has examined the effects of patriarchal relations on women’s contributions to migrant family firms (Anthias and Mehta 2003, Essers et al. 2014) as well as their paths to integration and empowerment as sole entrepreneurs (Essers and Benschop 2007). Rindova et al. (2009) coined the term ‘entrepreneuring’, which entails bringing about a “new state of economic, social, institutional and cultural environments through the actions of an individual or group of individuals’’ (2009: 4). As such, entrepreneurship can be a pursuit of freedom and independence (‘*breaking free* and *breaking up’* 2009: 9), a manner of disrupting the status quo and changing one’s position in the social order (2009: 6). Although these accounts contribute to our understanding of women entrepreneurs, the stories tend to focus on how gender representations are enacted within particular nation-state boundaries. To enhance this field, we draw on accounts from the sociology of migration and geography examining transnationalism (Glick Schiller 1999; Vertovec 2004; Rouse 1992).

* Transnationalism has been understood as ‘[…] the political, economic, social and cultural processes that extend beyond the borders of a particular state, include actors that are not states, but are shaped by the policies and institutional practices of states’ (Glick Schiller 1999, 96). The literature on transnationalism and migrant entrepreneurship has primarily examined the way migrant entrepreneurs engage in economic activities that transcend national borders (Landolt 2001; Portes, Guarnizo, and Haller 2002; Jones et al. 2010) by examining financial services, the import/export of goods, cultural enterprises that reproduce practices from the places of origin, and/or the opening of businesses in the countries of origin. However, these accounts have not extensively examined how gender and other social positions are being (re)produced within transnational spaces for migrant entrepreneurs. One notable exception is the use of transnational feminism to grasp the experiences of originally Indian women entrepreneurs in New Zealand (Pio and Essers 2014). Pio and Essers (2014) analysed how transnational processes played out in the lived experiences of professional migrant Indian women in New Zealand and their agency in decentring Otherness.

Considering the manner in which identities are shaped by the experiences of origin and destination has also been reflected in concepts such as ‘bifocality’ in Rouse (1992) and the ‘transnational habitus’ in Guarnizo (1997). Vertovec (2004) explained how a transnational perspective sheds light on the orientation of migrants’ lives, which are lived ‘here-and-there’ (2004, 970). Therefore, a transnational lens examining migrant women’s entrepreneurship will add to analyse how gender relations, social positions and representations are negotiated and reproduced across transnational social fields (Fouron and Glick Schiller 2001) and how transnational trajectories affect the established business strategies. This perspective creates new questions regarding the context (Welter 2011; Welter, Brush, and de Bruin 2014) in which migrant entrepreneurs are embedded into countries of destination, origin or both simultaneously.

*Power and social positions*

Given this complexity, how do we identify the multiplicity of dimensions and social positions in which female migrant entrepreneurs are embedded? The postmodern critique of the theoretical foundations of feminism has contributed to re-thinking categories of difference. ‘Intersectionality’ was coined by Kimberlé Crenshaw (1991) to elucidate the oppression of black women in the interaction of race and gender. This concept originally sought to do justice to the experiences of women of colour, which cannot be compared with white women’s experiences nor understood by white feminism (Holvino 2010: 252). Thus, intersectionality emphasises the simultaneous and dynamic interaction between different ‘axes’ of identity which entail different power relations and different relations ofoppression (Crenshaw, 1991).

The case studies of women in the migrant economy have also utilised this theoretical lens to grasp the intersection of multiple alignments of difference (education, religion, gender, ethnicity, disability) as well as how actors are positioned in the social structures of the destination country (Anthias and Mehta 2003; Valdez 2016; Villares-Varela 2017). These accounts have also explained how they ‘do’ entrepreneurship with regard to their various stakeholders (Essers and Benschop 2007; Essers et al. 2010; Pio and Essers 2014). However, this lens tends to be confined merely to the experiences of migrant entrepreneurs within particular national borders and rarely considers a transnational perspective. A translocational positionality approach departs from an intersectionality stance by incorporating a more dynamic approach to difference. As explicated by Anthias (2002), a ‘translocational positionality is one structured by the interplay of different locations relating to gender, ethnicity, race and class (among others), and their at times *contradictory* effects’ (Anthias 2002: 275). Anthias (2008) argued that

‘[p]ositionality combines a reference to social position (as a set of effectivities: as outcome) and social positioning (as a set of practices, actions and meanings: as process). That is, positionality is the space at the intersection of structure (social position/social effects) and agency (social positioning/meaning and practice). The notion of ‘location’ recognises the importance of context, the situated nature of claims and attributions and their production in complex and shifting locales […] The term ‘translocational’ references the complex nature of positionality faced by those who are at the interplay of a range of locations and dislocations in relation to gender, ethnicity, national belonging, class and racialization’ (Anthias 2008: 15-16) –originally underlined-

Therefore, the idea of translocational positionality is useful when examining identity and belonging, which transcend binary interpretations (Anthias 2002), e.g., subordination/empowerment, but also because this framework focuses on processes rather than the fixed properties of actors (*ibid.*)*.* In the following sections, we demonstrate how such an approach can be used to analyse the strategies and experiences of female migrant entrepreneurs.

**Methodology, data and context of the research**

This paper draws on the life histories of migrant women entrepreneurs in the Netherlands and Spain. Interviews in Spain were conducted with 25 migrant women, from Latin American countries (Argentina, Uruguay, Venezuela and Colombia) as a component of a larger project on families of migrant entrepreneurs[[3]](#footnote-3). These entrepreneurs are first-generation migrants who arrived in Spain between 1998 and 2006 and ran small businesses in the service sector. The majority of these businesses were cafes, hair salons, laundrettes, clothing shops, grocery stores and bakeries. In the Netherlands, 10 interviews were conducted with female Turkish migrant entrepreneurs as a component of another larger project studying Moroccan and Turkish women entrepreneurs who established their businesses in the Netherlands[[4]](#footnote-4). Half of these entrepreneurs were first-generation migrants, and the other half were children of migrants. The interviews analysed in this paper were obtained from first-generation migrants active in various businesses, such as hairdressers, children’s day care facilities, and bathing houses; some women were lawyers or consultants.

Although the data analysed were derived from two different projects, the interviewees’ characteristics provided consistency to the sample and to the analysis of the data: in both countries, the interviewees were migrant women who had been entrepreneurs for more than a year at the time of the interview. The women were contacted through a wide range of stakeholders such as migrant associations, council services, business owners and informal contacts of the authors, with the goal of diversifying the profiles of the interviewees. After establishing the initial contacts, chain sampling (Penrod et al. 2003) was used to contact new entrepreneurs. This method is particularly useful to access hard-to-reach populations. The trust provided by known contacts of previous interviewees is crucial to provide a safe setting in which to participate in the interview and express the experiences and thoughts linked to the migration and business experiences. Interviewees narrated their lives, migration and family trajectories and focused particularly on the entrepreneurial process (opportunities, challenges, identity, management practices, connections with the country of origin, aspirations for the future).

One female researcher in Spain and one in the Netherlands, of Spanish and Dutch nationality, respectively, conducted the interviews. The interviews were conducted in Spanish in Spain with Latin American migrants. Conducting the interviews in Spanish did not entail any significant linguistic barrier given that Latin American migrants speak Spanish. In the Netherlands, migrant entrepreneurs of Turkish origin were interviewed in Dutch because they were quite fluent in Dutch. Interviews were transcribed verbatim and analysed using categorical content analysis. The outsider positions of the interviewers with regard to the migrant origin of the interviewees likely affected the emphasis the interviewees placed on illustrating their past lives in their countries of origin and the current arrangements in their destination countries. The insider position of the interviewers (also women) facilitated the narratives regarding the commonalities of enabling and constraining experiences of being a woman with regard to family and employment for the interviewees.

The content analysis of the entire sample captured patterns regarding transnational trajectories, social positions and entrepreneurship. Both authors discussed their findings of the content analysis carried out separately and compiled a list of emerging themes that were pertinent to the paper’s goals. These discussions led to a selection of two case studies per country to illustrate the transnational trajectories of female entrepreneurs in depth as well as the effects on their social positions. The case studies selected for the paper were translated into English by the authors. The most illuminating and articulate stories were selected in which these transnational trajectories and entrepreneurship occurred, highlighting converging and diverging narratives and the importance of context. Both authors evaluated the narratives of one another’s cases to assure the cross-comparability of the analyses and discussed the interpretations. This enabled the questioning of one another’s assumptions regarding the importance of context, social position and gender ideologies for each of the cases described.

Because this field of research is in its infancy, it is necessary to holistically examine these transnational practices in detail by demonstrating how the interviewees decipher these processes discursively. This approach entailed applying open coding to identify the experiences and strategies that were close to the interpretations and descriptions of the interviewees (Essers 2009). We searched for the most illustrative and concrete quotes that related to these topics, which were analyzed to tease out ‘what was said, why and how’ (Whetherell and Potter 1989).

*Context*

Regarding the contexts of data collection, Spain, and the Netherlands to a lesser extent, are both immigration countries with a colonial past. Although Turkey was not a Dutch colony, it is argued that the acquisition and treatment of Turkish guest workers is in fact a phenomenon that closely resembles certain aspects of colonialism (Essers and Tedmanson 2014). Turkish men emigrated in the 1960s and 1970s to fill jobs at the lower end of the labour market, and later family reunification resulted in women moving to the Netherlands as well. The women interviewed for this article emigrated in the context of this migration system as dependants of guest workers. Initially, because of scant contact between most ‘guest workers’ and the Dutch population, national opinion regarding these migrants was indifferent. However, in the 1980s, several politicians opposed the so-called multiculturalism policy, arguing that multiculturalism would entrench social divisions. Accordingly, migrants with Muslim backgrounds were attacked in the discourse against multiculturalism in the Netherlands in the 1990s, and anti-Muslim sentiment propagated negative stereotypes of people from countries such as Turkey (Essers and Benschop 2009).

The Latin American countries the interviewees originate from have strong links with Spain that relate to post-colonialism, existing migration corridors back and forth since the nineteenth century, and important financial and industrial interests in the region (Izquierdo-Escribano and Martínez-Buján 2014). The demand for Latin American migrant women grew from the 1990s because of the rapid development of the country since democracy. Latin American women conformed to the image of an ideal postcolonial worker as Catholic, Spanish-speaking who would enter domestic and care sectors that were previously occupied by women from Spanish rural areas (Martínez-Buján 2010). This preference is also reflected in more favourable migration policies shaped by postcolonial relations that have produced less restrictive visa regulations as well as the easing of the requirements for citizenship (Izquierdo-Escribano and Martínez-Buján 2014). This openness in the migration policy is accompanied by greater acceptance of migration flows by the Spanish population because of historical migration corridors to and from Latin America and because of similarities with Spain in language, religion and ethnicity. These ethno-cultural similarities significantly influenced the settlement of Latin American migrants in a welcoming postcolonial setting, particularly compared with other migrant groups in the country (e.g., North African migration). Despite these advantages, discrimination in the labour market persisted, reflected in the strong employment segregation in particular sectors of the economy. It is in this context that the female entrepreneurs interviewed are more broadly incorporated into the Spanish labour market.

Although we are aware that culturally, Turkish migrants in the Netherlands differ more from the majority population than Latin American migrants in Spain, both migrant groups are substantially different in their heritage and have other institutional and societal backgrounds. Moreover, it is our intention to explore how female migrant entrepreneurs practice entrepreneurship in their new Western European environments compared with their home-countries. Such processes may reveal differences but also interesting similarities.

To understand the transnational trajectories of migrant entrepreneurs and the importance of context, we present the experiences of migrant women in different migration contexts in northern European and southern European migration countries to identify the usefulness of a translocational positionality approach. However, our goal is to illustrate this phenomenon in two different contexts, not to systematically compare these two cases or to generalize to the population. Our intention is to gather new theoretical insights to provide new conceptual tools in the intersection of context, female immigrant entrepreneurship, and transnationalism.

**Findings**

The examples below illustrate how transnational trajectories affect these female migrant entrepreneurs’ social positions and the manner in which the women conduct business. Our analysis focuses on three interconnected areas that reflect shifting social positions and their transnational dimension for migrant women entrepreneurs: (i) their transnational business experiences, (ii) the translation of social status, and (iii) the manners in which they comply with and contest gender norms and relations.

***Transnational business experiences: ties with the country of origin for developing the firm***

Tullay (43) is Turkish, an atheist, and was born near the Black Sea in the north of Turkey, in Trapzon. Notably, during her childhood, she lived in the Netherlands for several years with her parents and then moved back to Turkey, married there, and then returned to the Netherlands 15 years before the time of the interview. Tullay was divorced in Turkey and recounted attempting to rebuild her life in Turkey twice. After those efforts failed, Tullay fled to the Netherlands with her three children. After an extremely difficult period, moving from one shelter to the other, she finally got her life back and set up her own sewing and clothing company. Tullay conveyed the transnational character of her business and trajectory more broadly:

If you live in your own community, then you cannot become an entrepreneur. Then you are only in contact with your own people, but you do not speak to other groups (…) If someone asks me if I am a native or non-native, I say, ‘I feel like a cosmopolitan. I don’t have a national feeling because I am a Turk’ (…) I sometimes speak, for instance, at the Chamber of Commerce, for ethnic minority women. I was a role model [for other non-native single mothers]*.* Maybe that is why they were so positive about me (…) I used to import from Turkey, but the shop is too small now to do so. (…) It was only necessary, once or twice a year, [to travel]. It is also fun to do business. Not difficult. In Istanbul you call, you are picked up, and then you get a chauffeur and a secretary and they guide you to that place. It is not that I am totally alone there; [I have] guidance from the family (…) I don’t have much contact with people with a Turkish background, because Turks here are different from Turks in Turkey.

For Tullay, to be an entrepreneur means to reach out to other nationalities and other cultures, as shown by her contention that one should not confine business relations to one’s own community because such a limitation reduces the likelihood of success. The interesting and complex observation of the importance of context in this excerpt is that despite the cosmopolitan narrative, Tullay’s entrepreneurial practice is shaped by the traditional gender structures in the market exchange in Istanbul in which she must be guided by male chauffeurs and family. Although she would not easily accept being guided by males and relatives in the Netherlands, Tullay accepts such traditional gender practices in her country of origin for the sake of her entrepreneurial positionality. Tullay accepts this tradition despite her statement that she does not have significant contact with Turks because Turks in the Netherlands are different from Turks in her home country. This statement implies that she does not approve of the norms and values of Turks in the Netherlands relating to gender equality and doing business. This dichotomy reflects how her relation with being ‘Turkish’ is emphasized by complex identity positions. Tullay’s speaking to other groups relates, moreover, to the realisation that entrepreneurship is something that is conducted in its context with various stakeholders, unlike the traditional idea that entrepreneurship is an individual activity.

Natalia (29) also illustrates the importance of transnational connections in the Spanish context. Natalia emigrated from Colombia to Spain to work as a caregiver. She was divorced and left behind two children, who stayed with her mother and brother. After working in Spain for seven years, Natalia managed to save sufficient money to open a hairdressing salon that primarily targeted a Latin customer base. Natalia explained that links with her country of origin are important to supply certain business needs. The transnational contextualisation of her operations indicates she activates the support of family members and their networks to purchase products at a good price. Natalia maintained that knowledge of the Colombian diaspora of hairdressing in the US is transferred back to Colombia and later utilised in her business in Spain:

I have noticed that the diaspora in the US has accomplished very good deals for products in Colombia and the other way around. Some new techniques and products are developed in the US, particularly among African-American hairdressers. They import hair from India and other Asian countries […]. The Colombian market has copied some of these new trends, and they have started to source some of these […] This is thanks to the Colombians in the US […]. Also with nail products […] So my cousin in Colombia knows two stalls in big markets where she gets products at a very good price and she keeps them for me, so I can get them when I go back home to visit, or she sends them with someone to Spain […] In exchange, she keeps some of the products I pay for, and she also does some informal hairdressing at her place for neighbours and friends. […] Because my salon is small, I don’t need large quantities, so I do it through family.

It is revealing that Natalia activates her family ties in Colombia to have a competitive advantage in her business by reverse remittances of goods and knowledge. Natalia is essentially conducting business transnationally, following Portes et al.’s (2002) idea of involving family members in the country of origin and by traveling back and forth to Colombia to import goods for her business. Natalia also helps her cousin in Colombia with her informal hairdressing business. The strategies deployed in her small hairdressing salon in Spain cannot be explained without acknowledging cross-national relations, shaped by the extent and the nature of her family ties in Colombia, the supply of products through diasporic networks in the US, market exchanges in the country of origin, and the solidarity among the women in Natalia’s family.

***Transnational space and enterprise: social status ‘here and there’***

For Natalia (29), opening up her business meant moving up the mobility ladder in the Spanish context and feeling emancipated from strong power relations between employer and employee in the workplace. Natalia recounts how this step up provided the chance to start the paperwork to reunite with her children and liberate her mother from care duties. Natalia explained the asymmetry of her positions in her countries of destination and origin: years of sending remittances have provided a better status with regard to her family in her country of origin as opposed to strong power relations that occur in private live-in domestic work in Spain. These contradictory class positions are explained in this manner:

I send money home because my children are there. That’s why it took me longer to save up enough for the business. Things are not easy. You have to pay for school fees, [and] my mother cannot take as much work as she would like to because she is taking care of them. And my brother is also there. He is unemployed, and I notice he now looks up to me, and he mentions he would like to follow my steps [in emigrating]. […] I used to always be the one in the family deemed the ‘black sheep’, with being pregnant when I was too young, unlucky with my husband […] but now I am respected. Being here, getting out of the country and sending money, now they listen to me […] And then at work, I was tired of going from employer to employer who made very high demands on my time, only Sundays off, for not much money.

For Natalia, changing contexts transformed her social position in both spaces simultaneously: in Spain, she managed to climb the social mobility ladder by abandoning private care work and starting her own business, whereas in Colombia, Natalia reversed her position from being the ‘black sheep’ to becoming the central actor in a transnational household. Her transnational experience challenged hierarchical relations within her family. As a business owner, Natalia sends remittances to her mother and brother, who looks up to his sister.

However, Natalia’s change in social position was not achieved without cost. Because her mother cannot take as much paid employment as in the past, she is much more financially dependent on Natalia. Moreover, emigration meant leaving her children on the other side of the world, which came with a high emotional cost. Once again, her entrepreneurial trajectory cannot be explained merely by studying the context of the country of destination (Spain); one must look simultaneously at how the positionality of her role in negotiating her social positions in both country of origin and country of destination relates to the role the firm occupies in her occupational trajectory. Similar analyses were developed by Fouron and Glick Schiller (2001) when those authors explained that migration may help women shed the gendered constraints by income generation and may increase the status of the family in the country of origin.

Status is also at the core of Tullay’s description of the difficulties of moving back and forth to the Netherlands:

I have led a life in which my ex [ex-husband] was the boss, but I was also my own boss. I was used to having people working for me, the nanny and cleaner (…). But after the divorce, I tried for 2 years to live in Turkey, but under the pressure of my family and my ex, I couldn’t build up my own private life…. Eventually I decided to flee with my children to the Netherlands (….) Yes, we were all illegal. We found a women’s shelter, stayed with acquaintances. I was entitled to nothing; I took care of my children by informal work, a bit of support from others. That’s over now. Under pressure from the family, he [her ex-husband] wanted to see the kids. He was allowed to see the kids and so he kidnapped them. I was illegal so couldn’t leave the country. The police were warned, Interpol, [but] they couldn’t find him. Only after 5 days... I received a phone call from the Greek police…[saying] I could get the children. After that, we remained 2 years illegally and then we got our residence permit. I was on benefits, nothing for me; you sit at home and do nothing, an aimless life (…). During that time, I was first in crisis shelters, in Leiden, participated in a project that tried to emancipate women through fashion (…) Then I started to make a business plan, marketing research, knocked at the local government’s door with ‘Look, I have a plan. What do you think about it?’ I convinced the first contact person, and then I was transferred to another department, and I convinced her too, and then I got other meetings (…). Then I got my loan and then I started.

In Tullay’s situation, albeit in quite a different manner from Natalia, her emigrating from Turkey to the Netherlands implied the transformation of a different social position. In Turkey, Tullay had a middle class position, reflected in the fact that other women worked for her (‘the nanny, the cleaner’) whereas in the Netherlands she literally had nothing and had to start from scratch. Although materially Tullay had nothing, what she did obtain throughout the entire process was her independence from her husband and her family. However, this freedom was not acquired easily; the pressure from her family remained, which eventually even caused her husband to withhold their children. Starting a company is an immediate result of her wish to be self-sufficient for both her children and herself as well as to be independent and have a goal in life. Her narrative makes clear that her transnational movements made Tullay to move from one class position to another (from middle class to a low social status). Her entrepreneurship improved her social positioning in the Dutch context and allowed Tullay more control of her life with regard to her previous situation with her ex-husband.

***Transnational space and enterprise: Unsettling (unequal) gender relations***

The strategies and identities of migrant women entrepreneurs are shaped by the gendered structures embedded in transnational contexts, which occurred with Lidia (32). Lidia was born in Venezuela, worked as an accountant part-time and cared for her children. She immigrated with her husband and children to Spain because of a deteriorating quality of life and fears for their safety. A favourable institutional context allowed Lidia to apply for Spanish citizenship on ancestral grounds. This benefit gave her a ‘fast-track’ to enter the labour market compared with other migrants in the country. However, Lidia realized that her skills were not easily transferable, given the lengthy process of validating her degree. When confronted with the limited opportunities in the Spanish labour market, Lidia decided to start her own small business, opening up a shop that sold clothes for children. In the meantime, her husband (with a background in economics) invested in getting his degree validated. This strategy meant going to the local university for two years to complete the required credits. Lidia explained this strategy was designed to prevent the family from falling into poorly paid employment but also to maintain the productive-reproductive structure the family had enjoyed in Venezuela: her husband as well-paid bread winner and Lidia balancing child care and part-time employment.

In Caracas, our life was perfect regarding jobs. My husband was happy; he was earning relatively well. I would do some work, but mainly took care of my children. But things started to get worse, the economy, politics […] We wanted a better place for our children […] You did not know any more if the country was becoming a new ‘Cuba’ [a socialist government]. There is a lot of pressure on business owners, or those who are high achievers. They are punished; there are fears of expropriation. So this is not sustainable. We want to prosper and not have limits by the government of the time […] Now here [Spain], the employment situation is limited. I have opened the shop, and it provides the basic turnover to get by. But this is temporary. When he gets a good job, I will get someone for the shop part-time, so I can only come when the children are at school.

Here, we see that with the opening of the business, Lidia is liberating her husband from low-paid, low-status jobs so that he can complete his university courses to validate his degree and obtain a job with higher status. Notably, Lidia is attempting to recover the gender arrangements the family had in their country of origin, where the husband was the primary breadwinner and she was working part-time and taking care of the children. Despite her being the primary breadwinner of the family, Lidia considers the clothing store to be a ‘temporary fix’ until their previous gender relations can be restored.

It is also important to note that Lidia articulates that the socialist government in Venezuela does not provide sufficient stability (‘the country is becoming like Cuba’) to become a successful entrepreneur. The image of the country of origin moving closer to being a highly regulated economy was a frequent narrative among the Venezuelan entrepreneurs interviewed in Spain, who took a strong political position defending a liberal free market in opposition to the socialist Venezuelan government of Chavez (1999-2013). Therefore, understanding Lidia’s motivations as a migrant entrepreneur in Spain must include her political positioning regarding the Venezuelan socio-political context and the reconfiguring of her family’s gender and income-producing arrangements: prioritising her spouse’s career in paid employment to enable a traditional balance of care and productive work like before in the country of origin.

Cemille (47) has a consulting company that advises various organisations regarding diversity management. She depicts her background as a Kurdish girl of the Alevi religion, born in eastern Turkey.

I was born in the Kurdish part, in Tunceli, a wonderfulcity. Very liberal. Within Turkey, you have various streams of Islam. The liberal stream, the Alevi, is active in Tunceli, .In 1979, I moved from Tunceli to the Netherlands, Rotterdam. (…) My father was already an entrepreneur in Turkey. In 1965, he thought, I am done here. It was a small city where he lived. Many things he already had. So he came to the Netherlands as a guest worker while he was an entrepreneur in Turkey. In 1978, my mother came and my siblings. And my other sister and I stayed in Turkey because we wanted to study. But then the war broke out there, with the Kurdish movement, and then I had to come to the Netherlands. Because I was a teenager and 15, and my parents said, this is not to be trusted, what they are going to do…. [laughs] And I was a teenager, and I was already against injustice; back then I already wanted to stand up for minorities. (…). I then learned the language… after a year I already started teaching minority women. I picked things up very quickly, I come from a very dynamic city, which was in movement; then you don’t sit at home. I followed an education. I first did my intermediate vocational education and then polytechnic university. And in addition to this, many trainings and courses. Worked in welfare, and in 2002, I started my own company.

Notably, Cemille speaks much more positively about her hometown, her region of origin and her family than Tullay did. Cemille experienced much more freedom than Tullay, emphasising the liberalism of her hometown, the Alevi, and her family situation. However, Cemille reported experiencing much injustice, referring to the repression of Kurdish people in Turkey, which forced Cemille to leave Turkey. In Turkey, Kurdish people compose a minority, and because of their different ethnic identity, which is expressed in different cultural and religious values and practices, as well as the quest for (more) independence, Kurds are often discriminated against and even perceived as all being terrorists by the formal government (Inquiries 2014). Her narrative, compared with the first two cases, indicates a continuity of social position preserving the values of liberalism and gender equality. Within her business context, Cemille capitalised on her minority background in her country of origin, Turkey, and her country of destination, the Netherlands. Cemille emphasised her stance by repeating, ‘I was already against injustice; I already wanted to stand up for minorities’. Notably, she acknowledges the gendered relationships in her own family: the entire family followed their father, the paterfamilias. However, Cemille also emphasised the Alevi value of gender equality, which obviously had a great effect on her family and the manner in which Cemille was able to stand up for herself and become an entrepreneur. These excerpts demonstrate we cannot understand the decision to start a business and the way entrepreneurs establish a business only by observing the situation and context in the destination country; we must consider the multiplicity of social positions with regard to status, gender, and family hierarchies.

Cemille, for example, referred to gender and ethnicity more explicitly:

My father was an entrepreneur. My mother a housewife in Turkey. We lived in a very liberal city; thus the man-woman equality was very high there. But it was a very small city, so there wasn’t a lot of work. Most men worked, women didn’t. Yeah, it was a city in which the Turkish government doesn’t invest. Because of the Kurdish background. (…)Nationalism I find a bit scary. I don’t think this is necessary […] Like, I live in the Netherlands, but tomorrow I could be in Paris! (…) When we came to the Netherlands, my father still wanted to be an entrepreneur; I have my own company, my sister has a hairdressing salon. My sister is now in Turkey; she also has a company. So it really runs in the family. Particularly the freedom is very important for me. (…) I like taking risks; that could have something to do with my Turkish background. There was some repression of course back then… I don’t know. (…) We moved to a real African neighbourhood, nice, quite dynamic. You would see it is a neighbourhood in which there are no investments happening. Perhaps that’s why I started my own company in this social area.

According to Cemille, the status quo was that most men worked and women did not. Cemille accepted this situation as a given because of the shortage of labour in that country at that time. However, when situations and contexts changed, she argued, women and men had identical possibilities, which should be realised. To support this value of gender equality, she referred to her Kurdish and Alevi background, emphasising that gender and ethnicity collided and that being Kurdish, Alevi and a woman simultaneously created gender equality. According to Cemille, freedom is an extremely important value inherited from her ethnic and religious origins and is manifested in her firm. Apparently, gender equality and freedom are important values in her family as well; both her sisters and her father are entrepreneurs.

**Discussion**

This paper examined the importance of context in the transnational trajectories of female migrant entrepreneurs in Spain and the Netherlands. We observed that, entrepreneurship gave them status, although their transnational trajectories replaced one social class position with another more than once. Within these trajectories, these women challenged, contested or complied with the gender relations in their families during their transnational journeys. These different positions relate to how gender and status operate within a multiplicity of spaces, as analysed by the framework of ‘gender geographies of power’ (Mahler and Pessar 2001). This idea is consistent with Rindova, Barry, and Ketchen’s (2009) re-conceptualization of entrepreneurial activity as a means of emancipation, which views entrepreneurial endeavours as change-creating efforts by which people seek to break free from (and potentially break up) existing constraints (Jennings, Jennings and Sharifian 2016: 81). In other instances, entrepreneurship emerges as a means of restoring gender arrangements in the country of origin and adjusting to the opportunity structure in the contexts in which they settle (Villares-Varela forthcoming). We synthesised the experiences of these case studies in the following perspectives of gender and social positionalities. These ‘ideal types’ can be identified as references to manners in which spatial and temporal contexts affect entrepreneurial strategies.

1. *Entrepreneurship as liberation from patriarchal structures*. This experience is reflected in Tullay’s narrative. Her becoming an entrepreneur was a powerful tool for reshuffling unequal gender relations with her husband and other male relatives in Turkey. Concerning social status, Tullay referred to having a good middle class position before divorcing and moving to the Netherlands, which was lost with migration. However, entrepreneurship gave Tullay a better economic and social status in the Netherlands. In her destination country, Tullay had to start over, beginning with nothing (at one point, she had even lost her children). Eventually Tullay developed her self-esteem and freedom. Migration and entrepreneurship shifted her social positioning to greater power and equality than she had experienced in the Turkish context.
2. *Entrepreneurship as a means of upward social mobility and the re-configuration of gender.* Natalia’s narrative shows how starting her business truly meant changing her social position in the Spanish context in which she first had to address unequal power relations at work and the financial demands of her relatives in Colombia. Her enterprise not only resulted in a stronger economic and more powerful position in Spain, but also in a more independent position in her family. Natalia would no longer be dependent on her mother in Colombia to care for her children because her family can be reunited in Spain.
3. *Entrepreneurship as re-establishing social status and compliance with gender relations from the country of origin.* Unlike the previous case studies, Lidia’s transnational journey was slightly different although quite interesting. Her entrepreneurship is temporary, helping her husband regain a certain social status in Spain to enable their gender and social class positions to be restored to the more traditional arrangements the couple enjoyed in the Venezuelan context (Villares-Varela 2017; Villares-Varela forthcoming). In this case, their social status was sacrificed to restore the class-based masculinity of the husband.
4. *Entrepreneurship for continuity of gender equality and embracing diversity.* Finally, for Cemille, entrepreneurship appears to be a natural, predestined position . Entrepreneurship runs in her family, and entrepreneurship is a vehicle to preserve her freedom and gender equality, two values this migrant clearly ascribes to her Alevi religion and Kurdish background. Historical and spatial contexts are crucial to her trajectory. Because these values are so important, Cemille sought to stimulate gender and ethnic equality by her diversity consultancy and standing up for other minorities. This type of entrepreneurial strategy, within the context of the transnational movements of migrant women, can be considered a tool to safeguard and defend gender and ethnic equality.

**Conclusion**

This paper used a translocational positionality approach to analyse the influence of transnational trajectories on women’s social positions. Using a *positionality* approach we addressed those perspectives that stress the importance of context in entrepreneurship research. We argued that these perspectives should incorporate a transnational point of view, accounting for the multifaceted nature of entrepreneurship for migrant women.

Using a translocational positional approach, our contribution to theory is threefold. First, the findings help advancing the conceptualisation of the historical, spatial, institutional and temporal contexts of transnational women’s entrepreneurship. We demonstrated how the lived experiences of women entrepreneurs ought to supersede nation-state boundaries and account for the trajectories and aspirations of both the countries of origin and the destination countries. We analysed various social positions, at times contradictory, that entrepreneurs experience in different contexts. Second, our paper enhanced the mixed-embeddedness approach by accounting for gendered structures within entrepreneurship and the way women conduct entrepreneurship with regard to those structures. Thus far, the mixed embeddedness approach has examined migrant entrepreneurship in a rather gender-neutral manner and has not acknowledged how gender interferes with structures at macro, meso and micro levels (Jones et al. 2017). In addition, we demonstrated the importance of considering transnational trajectories to understand how gender relations, status, and entrepreneurship are negotiated and reproduced beyond national borders. Additionally, our findings problematised this theory by demonstrating how female migrant entrepreneurs’ motivations are related to their positioning in the socio-political context in the country of origin.

Third, this paper endeavoured to refine the theory of intersectionality by dynamically demonstrating how social positions change over time and between spaces. Intersectionality, although highly valued as a means of grasping how people are positioned in social categories of inclusion and exclusion, is occasionally criticised for addressing these issues somewhat statically (see Essers and Benschop 2009). A translocational positionality approach (Anthias 2008) allowed us to address how these intersections change according to the ways in which women entrepreneurs move between a multiplicity of spaces and times.

Finally, our paper has a practical, societal contribution. Migrants are generally perceived in the global North as employees in large organisations or as dependent on welfare support. Often, women are perceived as being dependent on their male counterparts and/or as victims in their countries of origin. However, the women interviewed in this study were highly emancipated and independent, something often considered incompatible with the mainstream victimisation of migrant women. Our insights indicate that migrants cannot and should not be pigeonholed as one homogeneous group and that their experiences are highly diverse and dependent on their social positions in their countries of origin and destination countries. In these journeys, the women often take control of their own labour market incorporation in their new societies by establishing their own businesses.

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1. In this paper, we use female migrant entrepreneurs as an umbrella term for women business owners who were born in a different country from where the women currently live. [↑](#footnote-ref-1)
2. By ‘migrant economy’, we refer to those spaces in the market in which migrant women enterprises operate, irrespective of whether these take place in the countries of origin or destination. [↑](#footnote-ref-2)
3. This research was supported by the Spanish Ministry of Education and Science FPI grant ‘Ethnic Entrepreneurship as a means of Social Integration for Migrants. Second Generation and Gender Relations’, project reference SEJ 07750/SOCI. The interviews analysed in this paper were carried out by the first author. [↑](#footnote-ref-3)
4. This research was financed by the Dutch Ministry of Living, Quarters and Integration. The interviews analysed in this paper were carried out by the second author. [↑](#footnote-ref-4)