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Abstract
This paper investigates the Sisters' House (SH), a woman-only, intersectional reception project for migrant women in Brussels. Originating from volunteers' commitment to foster empowerment while addressing their specific needs, offering a 'safe space' that breaks the cycle of violence and trauma characteristic of their migration trajectories. This grassroots accommodation facility serves as a distinctive arena for pioneering inclusive reception practices. We analyze the SH project through the lens of constructive resistance – understood as 'initiatives where people start to build elements of the society they desire independently of and in opposition to the dominant structures already in place' (Sørensen et al., 2023:1). Specifically, we look at the feminist and intersectional principles underpinning the project's vision, and its five axes of implementation. Ultimately, we innovate by highlighting how intersectionality enriches the current conceptual framework of constructive resistance.

Introduction

This paper examines migration and asylum reception practices, the complex power dynamics involved, and initiatives of constructive resistance arising from this context. Scholarship on reception indicates that, in Western countries, immigration policies are often envisioned and enforced from a criminalizing perspective, dehumanizing migrant people and rendering them invisible through various containment and control facilities (Agier, 2011; Campesi, 2018; Mills et al., 2017; Sigona, 2015; Turner, 2016). This materializes in overcrowding, extreme promiscuity, and unhygienic conditions, facilitating the spread of diseases and the potential for sexual violence. Institutional concern about what happens within reception centers is minimal unless it involves public health or major hazards (Bello, 2022; Tosti et al., 2021; Whitehouse et al., 2021). In particular, Schmoll's (2020) book, *Les Damnées de la Mer* ('The Wretched of the Sea'), examines the spatial and moral boundaries created by reception centers, where trajectories are suspended, isolation and immobility are enforced, and boredom and marginalization are pervasive. For women, the enforced sharing of spaces and daily activities with large groups diminishes their sense of intimacy, contributing to a global chain of dispossession and dehumanization. Located at the intersection of different power relations, migrant women are thus often placed at the bottom of the scale of vulnerability and precariousness.

However, the portrayal of migrant women as the 'vulnerable other' often leads to their categorization as subjects 'in need of protection', a designation commonly employed by the humanitarian field. Butler et al. (2016) challenge this framework by proposing that vulnerability can be a source and condition for resistance. Rejecting the neoliberal concept of resilience - perceived as exclusive, individualistic, guilt-inducing, and non-progressive - they advocate for the concept of resistance (Bracke, 2016). This raises questions about how and under what conditions the reception of migrant women can be re-conceptualized and operationalized to value their agency and resistance. In other words, to 'shift the gaze' from reception practices focused on institutional objectives (securitization, control, management, relief) to those centered on the views and needs of migrant women themselves. To formulate this question, we draw upon the emerging field of Resistance Studies, which examines how marginalized groups and individuals navigate and respond to intersectional power relations, domination, exclusion, and inequality (Baaz et al., 2018; Johansson & Vinthagen, 2020; Motta & Seppälä, 2016). Within Migration Studies, the focus on resistance has also gained renewed attention (Mezzadra, 2010; Pezzani & Heller, 2013; Garelli & Tazzioli, 2013). In particular, Stierl's (2019) work on *Migrant Resistance in Contemporary Europe* employs such a 'switching the gaze' approach, advocating for 'resistance as method', which acts as 'power detectors' or 'analytics of power'. Within these debates, Murru (2020) has emphasized the need to explore the relationship between resistance and violence, examining how resistance operates within and is connected to experiences of violence. Traditionally, Resistance Studies have approached violence through the forms of resistance, distinguishing between violent and non-violent means (Murru & Polese, 2020). But in this paper, following Hill Collins' (2019) call to explore *Intersectionality as Critical Social Theory*, where violence is seen as a saturated site of intersecting power relations, we propose to look at violence as a theoretical starting point, a node from which a deeper understanding of (intersectional) resistance can emerge.

Drawing on the concept of constructive resistance, understood as 'initiatives where people start to build elements of the society they desire independently of and in opposition to the dominant structures already in place' (Sørensen et al., 2023:1), we explore the case of the Sisters' House (SH). This is a grassroots accommodation facility in Belgium, envisioned as a feminist shelter project, created by volunteers to address the specific needs of migrant women and provide a 'safe space' where they can break the cycle of violence and trauma typical of their migration trajectories. We mobilize data from in-depth auto-ethnography (Flamme, 2021) conducted between February 2020 and August 2022 by the first author (Garny, 2022), co-creator and former social worker of SH. In this research, alongside

materials drawn from participant observation through daily immersion, internal reports, writings and liaison notebooks, as well as her memory, she uses her privileged access to the project's history and development over its first four years to document migrant women reception practices through a feminist and post-colonial lens. In this paper, we focus on data concerning the SH's vision and implementation project and analyze it in a new light by mobilizing the concept of constructive resistance. We approach the experience of a former worker through feminist, intersectional research (Hamilton, 2019; Harding, 1993), which values insider perspectives as privileged positions for understanding standpoint experiences (Smith, 1987). This approach is valuable given the project's nature and the confidentiality required, which limit external resources and analysis. However, we do not stop there and provide a reflexive and critical analysis of this account.

In what follows, we first outline the Belgian context marked by a reception crisis and followed by an unprecedented solidarity movement. Second, we present the concept of constructive resistance and add an intersectional perspective. Third, we describe SH's vision, divided into four feminist and intersectional principles, and five axes of implementation. Finally, we analyze and discuss SH's case through the prism of constructive resistance and innovate by highlighting ways in which an intersectional praxis of constructive resistance contributes to its current understanding.

Belgian context of reception crisis and solidarity

The resurgence of the 'migratory reception crisis[1]' (Lendaro et al., 2019; Rea et al., 2019) is neither novel nor unforeseen. Since 2015, the crisis has recurred, marked by the saturation of institutional reception facilities and migrant people living on the streets due to a lack of political will (Mescoli, 2021; UNHCR, 2023). At both national and European levels, strategies have focused on controlling mobility, enforcing security measures, and discouraging migration, effectively signaling to migrant people that they are not welcome (Fassin, 2011; Kibreab, 1999). In addition to constructing physical and symbolic barriers (Agier, 2011; Yuval-Davis, 2019), EU member states have externalized migration management through bilateral agreements (e.g., the 2016 EU-Turkey agreement) and regulations (e.g., EU Dublin III Regulation). Belgium employs a similar strategy of shifting responsibility among its various levels of power. The Federal Agency for the Reception (Fedasil) oversees asylum and migration policies and supervises federal reception centers and mandates partners like Samusocial and the Belgian Red Cross to operate additional facilities. However, the current situation reveals the limits of their capacity and the impact of closing several centers. Federal centers only cater to asylum seekers, excluding those 'in transit'[2], those not seeking asylum in Belgium, and the 'long-term' illegalized[3] (e.g., the 'sans-papiers[4]'). These individuals fall under the homelessness sector, managed by seven

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[1] As we write, Belgium has been condemned over 8,000 times for failing to provide asylum seekers with the requisite level of dignity (FIRM/IFDH, 2023). This issue is part of a long history of migration-related challenges in the country. Since 2015, the term 'migration or refugees' crisis' has evolved into 'reception crisis' and is now described by practitioners as a 'policy of non-reception' (MSF, 2023).

[2] The term 'transit' has been used and critiqued previously (Collyer, Düvell & De Haas, 2012) but has acquired a new resonance in the present era, particularly since 2017, to refer to migrant people arriving in Belgium with no original intention of staying. This term attempts to cover 'a heterogeneous population on the move, with diverse legal situations, accumulating vulnerabilities and excluded from the institutionalized reception network' (Costa Santos, 2024, p.59).

[3] The term 'illegalized' is chosen in order to underline the institutional and political process leading to this precarious administrative status and the socio-economic reality in which those people are entangled (Bauder, 2014).

[4] This term encompasses individuals lacking legal status or seeking legal status, irrespective of their social, cultural, or geographical backgrounds, reasons for leaving their country of origin, or the procedures they have undertaken to obtain legal status in their host country (Vertongen & Briké, 2024).

regional public administrations with limited resources. Still, without access to shelter, people cannot rest, recover, or plan their next steps.

Since 2015, faced with governmental inaction, civil society in Brussels and its periphery has mobilized to provide accommodation, driven by principles of hospitality and care in a context resembling a humanitarian crisis. In 2017, the Citizens' Platform (BelRefugees) initiated an unprecedented 'hosting-at-home system' (Vandevoordt, 2020), emerging as a major player in Belgium's reception and accommodation landscape. Citizens, NGOs, and CSOs collectively organized daytime support tailored to the specific needs of individuals (such as day centers, service hubs, information points, and distributions) and nighttime accommodation facilities and shelters. In 2018, a group of women volunteers from BelRefugees observed a need for a structure catering to the specific needs of women among the homeless migrant population at Parc Maximilien[5] in Brussels. This led to the creation of the SH[6], inspired by the concept of a 'safe space' advocated by Black Feminist scholars (Hill Collins, 2000). Unlike the security-focused approach of institutional migration management, a safe space prioritizes trust, confidentiality, and the empowerment of individuals (Lewis et al., 2015). Aligned with the 'housing first' principle (FEANTSA, 2022), SH adopts a person-centered approach, considering shelter as crucial for addressing gender-based violence, migration, and homelessness. By providing an environment where women's rights are respected and dignity is upheld, SH pioneers inclusive reception practices, making it a unique grassroots accommodation facility in Belgium.

Constructive Resistance in face of violence
Constructive Resistance is a concept gaining momentum in Resistance Studies. It concerns practices that create, build, or acquire something considered better than the status quo. It observes and makes sense of how people experiment or create for themselves what they need in the present moment, through trial and error, changing practices and norms, and sharing their experiences with others (Sørensen, 2016)[7]. It is inspired by Gandhi's 'constructive program' (1945) or a strategy combining civil disobedience and non-cooperation with actions aimed at constructing an alternative society – and emerged as a necessary concept when realizing that the constructive aspects of resistance had rarely been developed in contrast to 'forms of resistance where protesters demand that others (such as governments, companies, or elites) take action' (Sørensen et al., 2023:1-2). Recently, constructive resistance is used, albeit quite marginally, to study a variety of practices, such as the Kurdish movement's attempt at self-governing in Turkey (Koefoed, 2018), Swedish workers' cooperatives (Wiksell, 2021; Sørensen & Wiksell, 2019), the MST landless movement in Brazil and the Zapatista autonomous government in Mexico (Sørensen, 2016; Sørensen et al., 2023), practices of nonviolent action (Rigby, 2022; Vinthagen, 2007, 2015), maternal activism along the US-Mexico border (Busse & Montes, 2024) and discursive aspects of resistance (Lilja, 2021). In this paper, we draw on Sørensen, Vinthagen and Johansen's

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It holds political significance, historically associated with advocacy for regularization of their status (Delhaye & Bah, forthcoming).

[5] The *Parc Maximilien* is a public park in the North district of Brussels that has historically served as a gathering place for migrant people since 2015. That year, a temporary camp in the area was established and has since become a site for numerous gatherings and meetings between citizens/volunteers and migrant people.

[6] The name 'Sisters' House' was intuitively chosen and refers to the way the women (volunteers, citizens, and migrant women) were spontaneously calling each other 'sister' without having to know each other's names in the *Parc Maximilien* during dispatch and various encounters.
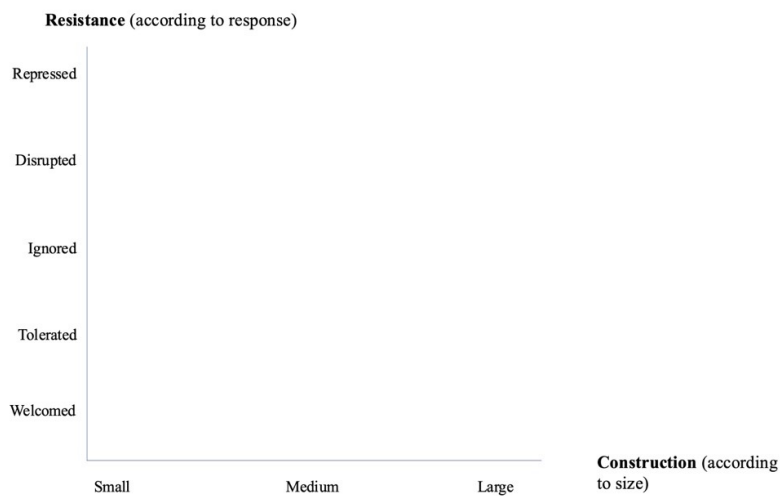
[7] The concept of constructive resistance is often linked to that of prefigurative politics. While some similarities between the two concepts exist, they have been developed in different (theoretical and empirical) contexts and have been operationalized in different ways. Within the scope of this paper, there is no space for an elaborate discussion and comparison of both concepts but for more on this, see Sørensen et al. (2023), Maeckelbergh (2016), and Swain (2019).

(2023) conceptualization in their book *Constructive Resistance: Resisting Injustice by Creating Solutions.* In it, they break down what both 'construction' and 'resistance' entail and draw two different scales to help identify different practices as constructive resistance. These scales are not intended to provide a fixed typology of the forms constructive resistance takes, but rather to highlight the diversity of practices within the concept and to provide an analytical tool for making sense of these initiatives and their ability to challenge power relations. The authors stress that their analytical lens is a starting point to encourage further empirical work that will help strengthen the concept and advance its analysis.

Central to the concept is that both elements, the 'constructive' *and* the 'resistance' parts, are together. On the one hand, it must be a practice of resistance – which signals the choice of words 'independently of" *and* 'in opposition to' dominant power structures in the definition. In short, it 'requires that the activity take place (at least initially) independent of mainstream powerful institutions (e.g. the state structures) and challenge (at least parts of) a dominant system (corporations, mass media, churches, etc.)' (Sørensen et al., 2023:53). On the other hand, it must also be constructive. Not to dismiss protest or other forms of contestation, but constructive resistance means to pay attention to initiatives that combine resistance with 'the creation, building, carrying out, and experimenting with what is considered desirable' (Sørensen et al., 2023:39). Within this definition, a variety of practices that propose alternatives to the present can be included as constructive resistance, ranging from individual initiatives to practices involving large numbers of people, hidden (under the authorities' radar) or public (more confrontational), aimed at improving the lives of others or improving a group's condition, emerging as an immediate response out of necessity or as part of a larger movement strategy for expansion. The combination of resistance and construction can thus be thought of in different ways. Sørensen et al. (2023) propose two different scales that highlight the diversity of these practices and facilitate the analysis of specific cases.

The first scale (see Figure 1) looks at the combination of resistance and construction in relation to the response of the authorities and the size of the initiative. Resistance practices can range from: welcomed, tolerated, ignored, disrupted, to repressed. The constructive component can range from a small, medium, to large size participation.

Figure 1. Resistance / Construction in relation to response and size. Reproduction of the scale found in Sørensen et al, 2023:41.

The second scale (see Figure 2) looks at the combination of resistance and construction in terms of the visibility and the actual impact of the initiative. Resistance practices can vary on the dimension of confrontation with authorities, ranging from being secret/hidden, to discreet, or more open/loud. The constructive component can lead to different degrees of consequences at the time of evaluation ranging from merely inspiring and alternative, complementing existing conditions, partially replacing them, or leading to the collapse of a previous status quo.

Figure 2. Resistance / Construction according to visibility and consequence. Reproduction of the scale found in Sørensen et al, 2023:41.
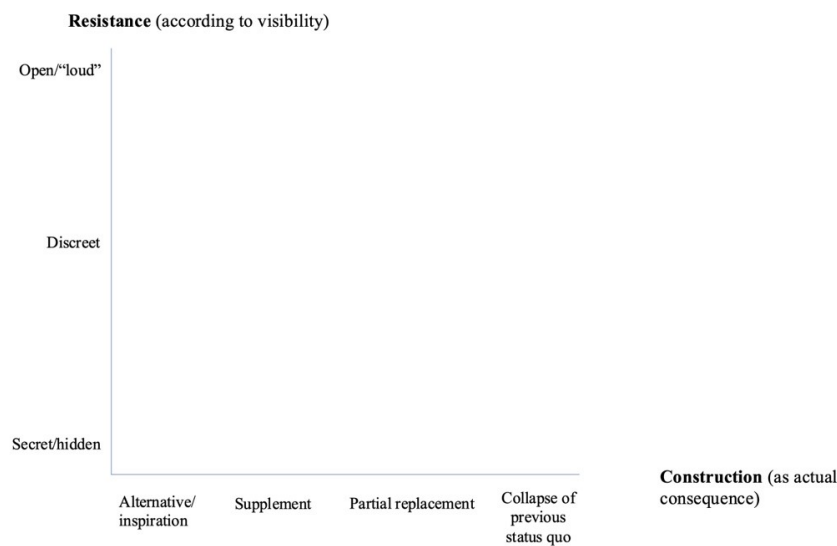
While these scales are helpful analytical tools, Sørensen et al. stress that there is no normative aspect to constructive resistance. It

> is not necessarily "good" and in accordance with respect for human rights, democracy, international conventions, or other normative value systems. What starts out as constructive resistance might itself result in new forms of domination and exploitation when it grows and expands (2023:52).

We thus seek to de-romanticize what we observe (Abu-Lughod, 1990) and to understand the extent to which projects such as SH run the risk of being mainstreamed or co-opted by dominant structures – with all the benefits (e.g. lowering access threshold) and pitfalls this involves (e.g. when governments or private companies take over, the practice risks becoming detached from its constructive vision and purpose). The risk of mainstreaming leads Sørensen et al. (2023) to suggest that cooptation is more likely to occur when the constructive and resistance parts of constructive resistance are carried out separately rather than being *integrated*. They stress,

> When we talk about combination, we mean that constructive aspects and protest-oriented aspects can be carried out in parallel under the same umbrella, as coordinated but separate activities. However, constructive resistance can potentially become even more powerful when these two sides are well integrated and

inseparable from each other. A major question for movements, then, is how to achieve this integration (2023:189).

Intersectionality was developed to emphasize that intersectional power relations should not be understood as simply adding up (forming a kind of 'more' domination), but rather as contributing to the creation of new and unique experiences of domination that are different from the simple sum of the power relations involved (Crenshaw, 1991). In addition, Collins (2019) proposes to understand intersectionality as starting from experiences of violence. Violence, she contends, is a saturated site of intersectional power relations. If we understand resistance as a relational concept (Sørensen et al., 2023) and as a response to power, then unique forms of domination will lead to unique practices of resistance. Following this though, if the experience of violence is a starting point to understand intersectional power relations, possibly, it can also be a starting point to understand why resistance emerges in specific ways – in other words, to understand 'intersectional resistance'.

As has been developed by various authors (Schmoll, 2020; Freedman et al., 2022; Bretherton & Mayock, 2021), the experience of homeless migrant women is specific due to the combination of gender, racial, and class violence. The reality of SH residents is no stranger to this analysis. Whether it is part of the reason for their departure, experienced during their trajectory or in the country of arrival, gender-based violence is a common feature of their trajectories. Most women hosted in SH are racialized, born in sub-Saharan countries, making them experience racial and colonial aspects of migration policies and the reception paradigm (Ibrahim, 2005; Picozza, 2021). Made vulnerable by their homelessness, lack of valid documents, they swell the ranks of the marginalized and invisible precarious in a context of continental compartmentalization, repressive border policies, and a crisis of reception (Brugère & Le Blanc, 2017; Rea et al., 2019). As it is highlighted in the next section, it is in response to migrant women's position at the intersection of multiple forms of domination that contribute to their vulnerability, that SH chose to organize reception from a feminist intersectional perspective. What we find interesting is that intersectionality is mobilized not only to look at power relations but also as guiding praxis. As this link between an intersectional practice in response to experiences of violence is central to the creation of SH, we find this case uniquely suited to explore these issues further.

In the following sections, we first describe the project as it was conceived and evolved. We then analyze this process through the lens of constructive resistance in our discussion, highlighting the centrality of intersectionality in contributing to an integrated form of constructive resistance.

The Sisters' House in praxis
SH is a gender-sensitive and non-mixed emergency shelter for illegalized migrant women in Brussels, set up by dedicated volunteers. Since its opening in November 2018, the project has evolved significantly, from two small apartments housing twenty-six residents[8], to a larger facility that can currently accommodate up to eighty women. Initially an overnight shelter, SH transitioned to a 24/7 operation in March 2020 due to the COVID-19 pandemic, introducing a thirty-day renewable stay policy contingent on interviews with social workers. Individuals share bedrooms for a maximum of sixteen people per room. Communal living areas include two lounges, two dining rooms, six shower cubicles, and a kitchen. These features contribute to the establishment's predominantly communal living environment. The shelter is supported by a diverse group of residents, volunteers, and social workers. Residents, initially 'in transit', (arriving at SH to rest for one or more nights before continuing their

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[8] SH uses the term residents in place of the often-used term in the reception sector of 'beneficiaries'. They found the latter to be problematic, conveying a very top-down (humanitarian) vision of migrant women benefitting form a service, stripping them of their agency and leaving no space for empowerment in reception. It chose to use the term residents instead, and we do so as well in this paper.

trajectory) have diverse profiles and backgrounds, including women seeking long-term stays in Belgium unable to access an official facility. They come from regions such as North-Eastern Africa (Ethiopia, Eritrea, Somalia, Sudan, Libya), Central Africa (Burundi, Rwanda), Western Africa (Nigeria, Cameroon, Morocco) and Latin America (Mexico, Brazil, Venezuela), and are aged eighteen to eighty[9] .Volunteers, both temporary and permanent residents of Belgium, come from varied cultural and socio-economic backgrounds. Many were previously engaged in solidarity practices through BelRefugees. Their levels of involvement have evolved (in terms of number, role and implication, or duration), but continue to be a vital force of the project. Initially, the staff consisted of one coordinator on short-term contract. Since 2021, funding from the Brussels Capital Region has allowed the hiring of a diverse team of twenty-seven social workers, including social assistants, legal advisors, and cultural mediators. The team operates around the clock on a rotational basis.

While the volunteer and worker community initially comprised predominantly white, socio-economically privileged women, with limited understanding of migrant people's realities, and marked by a universalist feminist approach, close interactions with migrant women have fostered a shift towards a more intersectional feminist practice. In particular, the concept of sisterhood, as articulated by bell hooks and described as *Political Solidarity Between Women* (1986), guides their work, encouraging empathy, perpetual questioning, and collective struggle. Increased diversity within the team, now including many women with migration backgrounds, also enhances their ability to implement more coherent and adapted practices. This ongoing diversification aims at improving the team's understanding and approach to addressing the intersecting challenges of sexism and racism, making care and support an integral part of their political and social engagement.

Care and empowerment through four principles

Facing the absent or violent responses of the state, the creation of SH emerges by proposing a different reception for a specific and multivulnerabilized public. In doing so, SH resists the conventional humanitarian response and practices that still often enforce an alienating vision of reception and seldom consider intersectional problems (Ticktin 2011; Fassin 2012; Pette 2015; Brun 2016; Schmoll 2020; Mescoli 2021). With the aim of attending to the violent experiences of migrant women, the project's vision chose to embrace *empowerment* and *care* as two foundations of its praxis, operationalized through everyday practices in both obvious and subtle forms. This perspective strongly asserts the interconnectedness of self-care, collective well-being, information sharing, support systems, and self-advocacy. It asserts that care and empowerment form a symbiotic relationship, akin to a virtuous circle. By emphasizing the prioritization of care – whether for oneself, others, or the environment – individuals, groups, and the project itself not only support each other but also gain strength in mutuality. The project believes that the promotion of care and empowerment are mutually reinforcing, creating a dynamic in which each facet contributes to the enhancement and strengthening of the other (Garny, 2022).

At the heart of SH's commitment to a feminist and intersectional praxis of reception, four principles are articulated around the imbrication of *collective*, *community-based*, and *intercultural* approaches, aimed at responding to *individual* and specific needs. First, the *collective aspect* entails that the organization of the house is based on the participation and the empowerment of each woman involved in the project. Residents, volunteers and social workers are encouraged to express their will and preferences, but also to highlight and propose solutions to various interpersonal or collective problems. Praxis is thus characterized by more reciprocal relations and a greater space for the autonomy of migrant women. This is materialized through space (see hosting axis in the next section), where everyone has access to most of the rooms; in logistics, residents (sometimes helped by volunteers) take part in rotating teams for cooking, cleaning, or organizing; and in decision-making, residents are

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9 SH is a center for adult women only.

invited to daily collective discussions with social workers and volunteers about the housing system itself so that it can better meet their needs.

Second, the *community-based aspect* means that, beyond the collective aspect, there is a latent aspect of fostering a sense of community within the building and beyond, following the principles of sisterhood (hooks, 1986). By creating a safe space for residents, volunteers and staff provide a response to basic rights and needs, such as resting in a proper bed, having a shower, eating, having access to the internet, to a doctor's appointment, or to social and legal information (see healthcare and information and rights axis in next section). It also contributes to the sense of home and family – in other words, to the sense of community – by enabling women to celebrate joyful events or to mourn and go through difficult times together.

Third, because SH is a place where differences are embraced and seen as a necessary and positive challenge, the *intercultural aspect* is seen as a richness and a core aspect of the project. The diversity of cultures and ethnicities represented in the house are allowed to express themselves, with care taken to avoid under or over-representation of any. The many celebrations (e.g. Ramadan, Orthodox Easter, Christmas, or other non-religious festivities) are part of everyday life and each year is punctuated by the rhythm of these events. In addition, the diversity of migratory projects linked to each individual's aspiration is also highly cultural and creates a multiplicity of realities and rhythms of life within the house. As the house has grown, these have intensified. Staff and volunteers were sometimes confronted with cultural clashes and misunderstandings between communities and individuals or found it difficult to offer appropriate psycho-medical and social support to some residents because of language barriers. Since 2021, the team has therefore benefited from the intervention of cultural mediators to facilitate communication between 'sub-groups' and 'sub-communities' and between residents, staff and volunteers.

Finally, SH has an *individual* aspect, with the aim of meeting everyone's specific needs. The staff proposes a personalized follow-up in terms of psycho-medico-social support. Each resident is encouraged to express their specific needs to volunteers or social workers. Concurrently, volunteers are encouraged to pay attention to any information or observation that could be of interest to staff, in order to adapt and focus their attention to those who need it. Despite the collective aspect of the shelter, a personal support is thus proposed, based on trust and confidentiality, guaranteeing privacy and intimacy for each resident needing specific medical, psychological, social and administrative help. Ultimately, all interactions are generally conducted with the aim of mutual care (residents/volunteers/staff), which is mentioned during the first meeting on arrival at the SH.

The approach: 5 axes of activity

This intersectional vision of reception praxis, through its 4 core principles, is implemented through 5 axes of activity: hosting; healthcare; information and rights*;* awareness-raising; and advocacy. While these are 'ideal', practical, axes that SH seeks to advance, they inevitably have limitations and face challenges (BelRefugees, 2021).

First, *hosting* is envisaged as establishing women only safe spaces (Lewis et al., 2015) and following the 'housing first' principle. This involved thinking about organizing space around the needs of residents and encouraging their appropriation. Women have access to a wide range of rooms (kitchen, living room, washroom, lavatory, etc.) signaled with pictograms and labels in different languages. The walls are colorful, and residents are encouraged to participate in decorating the living spaces and creating a homely feeling. They can personalize the corner where they sleep with pictures of family members or other artefacts and are consulted on the (re)organization of different spaces. Simultaneously, they are asked to take an active part in the life of the house in various ways: cleaning, cooking, helping with translation when communicating with other (new) residents, learning together how to use orientation apps or public transport network in Brussels, group discussions on house rules, or the organization of events inside and outside SH (e.g. movie nights, theatre

or dance workshops, concerts, or sports). In this way, staff, volunteers and residents implement a reception that offers solutions adapted to each woman (e.g. pregnant, elderly, or with reduced mobility) in a co-creative and participatory praxis.

The project's initial structural limitations prevented the unconditional reception of all homeless migrant women. Given the needs identified in 2018 and the resources available, access to SH has been limited to isolated migrant women (i.e. unaccompanied by children or family) without alternative accommodation and not involved in administrative procedures exceeding six months. These implicit admission criteria, though not explicitly documented, aim to optimize resource allocation and maximize access through rotation. Designed to be flexible, these criteria adapt to changing political and social realities. However, these also create barriers for women who do not meet them – mothers, 'long-term' illegalized people or 'sans-papiers', or asylum seekers with legal access to public shelter – perpetuating a form of categorization based on perceived deservingness. This restrictiveness can be limiting and exclusionary for certain groups. Moreover, even though it is rarely applied, the hosting time limitation created to ensure a social follow up of each resident can be seen as a source of stress and a feeling of being pushed out of SH[10]. Additionally, the process of co-creating house rules, such as curfews, restricted access to certain areas, required participation in house activities, and nightly Wi-Fi shutdowns, often leads to tensions and negotiations. These discussions impact residents, volunteers, and staff, with sanctions used as a last resort, requiring ongoing dialogue and negotiation. Finally, the lack of privacy due to the prevalence of large communal spaces limits residents' ability to achieve greater autonomy and personal space. All these aspects reinforce the existing power differential between the staff/volunteers and the residents, thereby limiting the potential for implementing a more horizontal and egalitarian type of structure.

Second, SH collaborates closely with specialized partners to support *healthcare* for residents, addressing medical, mental, sexual, and reproductive health needs. This includes prevention work, physical and administrative support for medical procedures, and an intercultural approach with NGOs and health services specializing in gender, health, and migration. Efforts focus on improving access to emergency medical care, preventing and supporting victims of sexual violence, developing community health strategies, and training volunteers and interns to promote a more inclusive health system. However, as SH is not a medical center with specialized staff and equipment, it faces limitations in supporting women with severe psychological or medical issues. The team has had to discontinue accommodation for women whose needs exceeded their capacity, such as those with severe mental health problems or addictions. This creates tension among team members who struggle to balance being the last refuge for the most vulnerable while maintaining a safe environment for all residents, volunteers, and staff. Some residents perceive the inability to address all vulnerabilities as abandonment or rejection, exacerbating feelings of isolation. This sense of powerlessness and injustice among workers fuels frustration and anger towards state institutions, which they see as failing to support the most vulnerable, leaving frontline workers to bear the burden of systemic inadequacies.

Third, in the *information and rights* axis, SH provides legal advice and socio-legal orientation to residents, offering information on asylum and integration procedures through a suggestive rather than prescriptive approach. Residents can access the Humanitarian Hub,[11] information on international protection, and referrals to BelRefugees' socio-legal service (SISA) and Gams, which focuses on gender-based violence, including female genital

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[10] In theory, each resident is registered for a period of 30 days, after which she is invited to an interview with a social worker to review her individual situation and her plans. In practice, however, this time limit is rarely respected and is used as a reference point in case the facility becomes full.

[11] The Humanitarian Hub is a site of activities and services organized and provided by a consortium of associations including Médecins du Monde, Médecins sans Frontières, the Belgian Red Cross, SOS Jeunes and BelRefugees.

mutilation, forced marriage, human trafficking, and honor killings. SH uses knowledge from reading, networking, and empirical experience to provide tailored support and creatively use European and national legal instruments, such as the Istanbul Convention, to secure rights for victims of gender-based violence and homelessness. However, SH faces challenges when asylum claims are rejected, and return to the country of origin is not an option due to risk of harm. This precarious situation risks overburdening SH with long-term residents and requires careful consideration of exceptions, precedents, and their impact on collective dynamics. In such cases, because SH is an emergency solution and not aimed at hosting long-term residents, it has had to redirect residents to other solidarity networks. While SH always strives to find other hosting solutions for its former residents to assure they do not return to the streets, this highlights the lack of structural policy responses for those outside the asylum system. SH also grapples with the tension of not replicating categories of deservingness imposed by external policies, striving to maintain a non-discriminatory approach while managing internal pressures and resource limitations.

Fourth, SH focuses on *awareness raising* and providing a space for citizen participation in solidarity with migrant women. SH, in line with BelRefugees, was founded with the aim of promoting social cohesion and inclusion in civil society and raising critical consciousness among Belgian citizens about the reception crisis. These objectives have been fundamental, with women volunteers leading the project's operational tasks and missions. Volunteers' experiences have led them to advocate within their communities, creating a network of support for SH through various activities such as driving, laundry, collecting unsold goods, donating, and organizing free activities. However, as the project and staff have expanded, sustaining volunteer mobilization has become challenging. Regional support and funding have positioned BelRefugees as a key actor in the migration reception sector, shifting SH from a volunteer-driven initiative to one supported by professionals, some of whom are former volunteers. This transition has led to a different dynamic, where the creation of paid positions aimed at ensuring a more sustainable reception system has sometimes resulted in a perceived loss of meaning and commitment among volunteers. SH is now seeking to reconnect with its civic roots and reintegrate citizen volunteers to move away from institutionalization and maintain dynamic, local hospitality practices. This involves reinvigorating the volunteer aspect of the project to maintain the civic energy and commitment that underpins it.

Finally, SH engages in *advocacy* by uniting partners and allies to highlight the intersectional aspects of migration and the need for specialized reception facilities. Through field experience, volunteers and staff have gained valuable insights into the realities faced by homeless migrant women, enabling them to advocate on issues related to gender, race, precariousness, and homelessness. Collaborations with various actors, such as those within the Humanitarian Hub, other BelRefugees services, and external partners has helped to develop protocols that combine this knowledge, building strong political arguments to make these realities visible and propose holistic solutions. This approach, termed 'advocacy through action' by the SH founders, aims to create a network that can influence policy on gender, (transit) migration, and homelessness, while providing practical advocacy tools. Although SH has gained legitimacy over the five years of its existence, it remains vulnerable due to reliance on politically-dependent funding and a growing tendency to restrict migrant people's rights. The rapid expansion and high turnover of the team, from an almost exclusively militant/volunteer-based project in 2020 to a facility with 27 employees in 2024, means that the project has focused lately more on responding to hosting standards and needs, dealing with the higher pressure because of the increased number of residents, and developed a stricter position of workers. In other words, it evolved towards a mostly professional 'hosting and care' project, with less space for creativity and expression of workers and volunteers' political principles. Despite these challenges, maintaining the original feminist hospitality values is crucial to SH's advocacy and operational success.

Discussion

After outlining the creation, vision, and implementation strategies of SH, we revisit the concept of constructive resistance, defined as 'the building up of the new and the tearing down of the old that stands in the way, the *yeses* and the *no* in a creative combination' (Sørensen et al., 2023, p. 195, emphasis original). From what we have outlined, it is clear SH emerges as a form of constructive resistance. It embodies both aspects of this concept. It is positioned and created in resistance to Belgian Asylum and Migration policies that exacerbate the vulnerability and violence experienced by migrant women, and constructs an alternative praxis of sheltering that embodies a dignified and desirable vision of reception. SH aims to transform the status quo by shifting from an institutional understanding of reception to an approach centered by the needs of migrant women, thereby actualizing its vision of justice in the present. Using Sørensen et al.'s (2023) scales of resistance and construction, we analyze SH accordingly. First, with regards to the size of construction, SH was initially a small initiative with few residents and volunteers that has grown over time into a medium-sized organization (see Figure 3). Currently, SH employs a significant number of staff with diverse expertise and functions, supported by a network of volunteers. The organization has also expanded its capacity by relocating to larger facilities, increasing the number of residents it can host. This growth is accompanied by the professionalization of SH. Originating as a grassroots effort to provide safe shelter and care for homeless migrant women during the winters in the context of reception crisis and repression of 'transit migrants', the project has evolved into the 'women's facility' within BelRefugees.

Second, we observe a shift in the authorities' response to SH, evolving from being ignored, when SH's founders and volunteers independently sought funding and essential goods, to eventual tolerance (see Figure 3). Over three years, SH engaged in ministerial meetings, visits, and negotiations at municipal and regional levels to secure material, financial, and political support. The necessity of establishing a dedicated space for women was continually stressed. In 2020, as various government bodies deferred responsibility, volunteers initiated a petition to secure a new building necessary for SH's continued operation. This period increased SH's media presence and brought attention to gender issues within the Belgian migratory context. The Brussels-Capital Region now acknowledges the need of providing specific accommodation and care for migrant homeless women and children in a regional government agreement, which implies the funding of SH, covering material needs (furniture, food, hygienic products) and most staff salaries. Nevertheless, the current building's occupancy remains provisional and insecure, with an impending deadline and uncertain future relocation support from regional authorities.
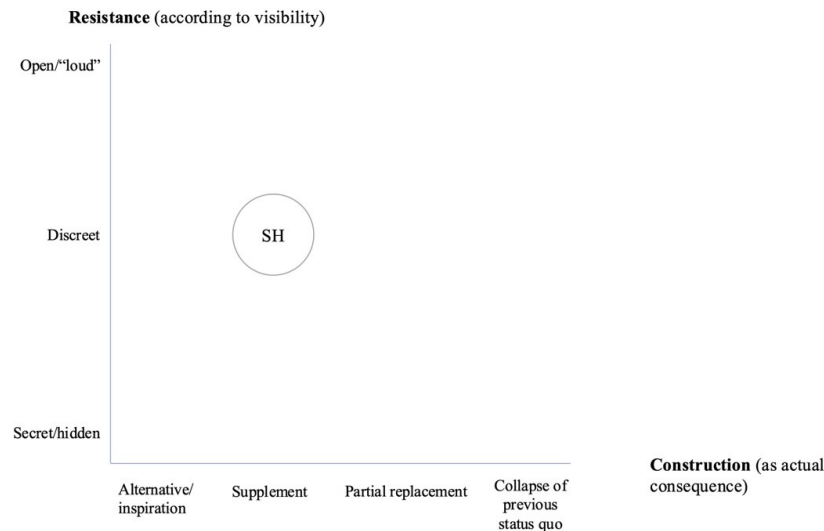
Figure 3. Resistance / Construction in relation to response and size.
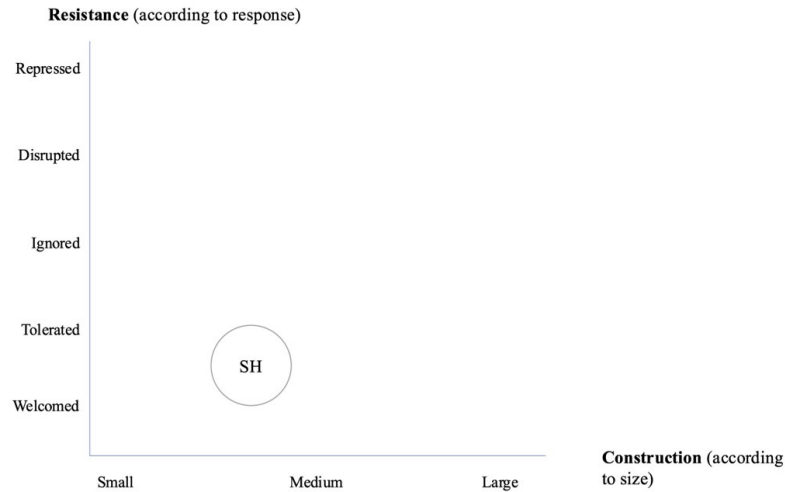
Third, regarding the visibility of SH's resistance and its level of confrontation with authorities, SH has maintained a discreet profile (see Figure 4). While never intentionally concealed from authorities, SH does not have an official website and withholds its address to protect residents. Awareness of SH spreads primarily through word of mouth, with its only mainstream communication outlet being a Facebook page aimed at recruiting volunteers and advocacy. Also, a priority is given to hosting and protecting residents which, following the growth of the project and a lack of means, has been at the expense of advocacy through confrontational communication. This aligns with the 'advocacy through action' vision, that entails action always has precedence compared to external communication. Since 2020, however, SH has gained media coverage, and recently an audio documentary[12] was produced to advocate for its mission and raise awareness of its alternative reception practices. Fourth, regarding the scale of actual consequences of SH's constructive efforts, it occupies a middle ground between inspiring an alternative approach and supplementing existing practices (see Figure 4). SH has likely avoided disruption or repression from authorities despite hosting predominantly illegalized migrant women because of the State's ambiguous stance in its reception crisis. The current government promotes restrictive migration policies while being bound by international commitments to provide shelter. SH serves as a refuge for individuals the government is unable or unwilling to accommodate. The recent 2024 elections, bringing an ongoing formation of new liberal regional and federal governments with different impacts, will most probably confirm the repressive paradigm, creating uncertainty about how SH will need to adapt and how this will impact its current achievements.

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[12]   The   audio-documentary   is   called   'Welcome   Sister'   and   can   be found here: https://wetellstories.eu/oeuvre/welcome-sister/

Figure 4. Resistance/ Construction according to visibility and consequence

Resistance (according to visibility)

Open/"loud"

Discreet   SH

Secret/hidden

Construction (as actual consequence)

Alternative/   Supplement   Partial replacement   Collapse of
inspiration   previous
                                                          status quo

Conclusion

Sørensen et al.'s (2023) analytical framework is valuable for examining SH from different perspectives, such as visibility, authority responses, and the size and impact of its alternative practices. This approach helps to consider its evolution over time and identify potential challenges. Sørensen et al. (2023) contend that constructive resistance initiatives also hold a risk of mainstreaming and co-optation. Indeed, should constructive actions appeal to authorities, there is a risk that resistance efforts may be suppressed to allow the constructive aspects to grow, leading to mainstreaming or co-optation. However, when a group's activities are simultaneously constructive *and* resistant – what Sørensen et al. term 'integrated' – it becomes more difficult for authorities to enforce compliance or docility. In alignment with this perspective, SH offers a fresh insight into the integrative understanding of constructive resistance. We find that SH enacts a constructive project though its four principles and five concrete axis of implementation – contributing to building today, the alternative reception practice they deem desirable. But through these constructive actions, we also observe constant political and advocacy claims. In particular, if we look at the five axes of activity, we find that each integrates a resistance component despite facing challenges: *Hosting* is viewed as a means to promote a just (re)integration pathway; *healthcare* is envisioned as ultimately contributing to a more inclusive system; *information and rights* holds that, without proper information, people cannot claim their rights, and is thus resisting the pitfalls of marginalization by equipping residents with empowering knowledge; *awareness-raising* extends feminist care values beyond the shelter; and *advocacy* strives for a more dignified reception praxis. Moreover, our analysis of the SH core principles and axis highlight two key points. First, SH's resistance to dominant and alienating reception practices stems from acknowledging and addressing the intersectional violence experienced by migrant women (including in mainstream reception facilities). Following our idea that violence informs both intersectional power relations- and the emergence of specific resistance practices, could the SH project then be considered as an 'intersectional resistance' to violent policies? Second, embracing intersectional principles, organized around empowerment and care, seems to lead to an integrated enactment of constructive resistance. Could intersectional resistance be a new way to think about integrated constructive resistance? While this calls for further

empirical investigation, our work ultimately opens up new questions about the claim that constructive resistance originating as a response to violence and embracing intersectionality in praxis, possibly has a stronger potential to destabilize the powerful status quo.

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