

Thematic streams

Looking back, moving forward: Migration studies in times of societal transformation

Centre for the Social Study of Migration and Refugees (CESSMIR), Ghent University
Conference Dates: 14 -16 September 2026

In a context of rapid and often turbulent societal transformation, migration researchers are increasingly called upon to reflect on how their work engages with and responds to shifting global and local dynamics. This conference invites contributions that critically explore how migration intersects with key sites of inequality, contestation, and change. Across education and healthcare systems, persistent ethnoracial disparities reveal how structural and interpersonal forms of discrimination continue to shape migrant experiences. Language and religion, meanwhile, emerge as potent boundaries in processes of racialisation and exclusion. At the borders, the intensification of violence, the erosion of legal protection, and the criminalization of mobility challenge the principles of solidarity and justice. In response, scholars and activists are developing alternative, community-based approaches to migration and border governance. Simultaneously, calls to decenter and decolonize migration studies are gaining ground.

To deepen these discussions, the conference will be structured around six thematic streams that offer spaces to look back at critical debates in migration research, while moving forward in dialogue with ongoing societal transformations, with a focus on areas where CESSMIR researchers brought significant contributions. Furthermore, the conference also seeks to explore the dynamic interplay between migration research and policy, practice and activism, reflecting on the role of scholars and the impact of their work in this interplay.

1. Ethnoracial inequalities in education
2. Health at the intersections: migration, race, and inequality
3. Multilingual borders of migration
4. Entanglements of religion, race and migration
5. Rethinking borders, solidarity and migration law
6. Decolonial approaches to migration studies, narratives, practices

In celebration of its 10th anniversary, the Centre for the Social Study of Migration and Refugees (CESSMIR) at Ghent University invites researchers, practitioners, NGO representatives, volunteers, activists, and policymakers to join us for a conference exploring migration studies in a changing societal landscape.

This conference not only marks a decade of CESSMIR's dedication to advancing the study of migration and refugees, but also aims to create a vibrant space for dialogue, reflection, and collaboration. Join us as we look back at the major changes in the last ten years, and envision new paths forward, strengthening the links between research, practice, and societal impact.

Scientific committee

Sophie Bols
Hilde Depauw
Ilse Derluyn
Ellen Desmet
Judy De Wilde
Fanny D'hondt
Lisa Franke
Marie Jacobs
Chloé Lybaert
Katrijn Maryns

Giacomo Orsini
Lotte Remue
Elisa Robbe
Alexandra Sanchez
Sorana Toma
Robin Vandevoordt
An Van Raemdonck
Wendelien Vantieghem
Floor Verhaeghe
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Organizing Committee

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STREAM 1: Ethnoracial inequalities in education

Stream organizers: Chloé Lybaert (Translation, Interpreting & Communication), Fanny D'hondt (Sociology, VUB), Wendelien Vantieghem (Linguistics) - Designated contact person: chloe.lybaert@ugent.be

This stream focuses on how ethnoracial inequalities take shape across different educational levels — including early childhood education, primary and secondary schooling, and higher education. Educational contexts are central to processes of social inclusion and mobility, but they also reflect and reproduce broader societal patterns of inequality. Migrant-origin and ethnoracialized students often encounter distinctive challenges in navigating these contexts, which can impact their educational trajectories and outcomes. Furthermore, educational professionals are not always willing or able to teach in diversity-responsive ways, contributing to the barriers experienced by students.

Inequities in education may stem from a range of factors, including differences in access to resources, language and cultural barriers, and institutional and educational practices that may disadvantage certain groups. Research in various disciplines has documented how inequality manifests in phenomena such as (perceived) disparities in school readiness, academic tracking, differential treatment in classrooms, and underrepresentation in higher education pathways. Scholars have furthermore explored how education systems can adapt to better serve diverse student populations and foster more inclusive learning environments.

This stream invites contributions that examine how ethnoracial inequalities are produced, experienced, and addressed in educational settings. We welcome empirical, theoretical, and methodological work that engages with topics such as:

- The role of institutional structures and policies in the (re)production of educational inequalities
- Language acquisition and multilingualism in educational contexts
- Language policies and their impact on migrant-origin and ethnoracialized students
- Racism, implicit bias, and stereotyping in educational contexts
- Teacher expectations, classroom interactions, and cultural responsiveness in pedagogy
- The experiences of migrant-origin and ethnoracialized students in compulsory education and higher education institutions
- Intersectional explorations of how ethnoracial educational inequalities intersect with other axes of diversity

Note that for empirical work, data collection should be finished.

By bringing together a range of perspectives, this stream aims to facilitate interdisciplinary dialogue on the dynamics of ethnoracial inequality in education. In doing so, we not only seek to advance academic understanding, but also to inform policy, professional practice, and public debate. We particularly encourage contributions that reflect on the broader societal implications of their findings, or propose pathways toward more equitable and inclusive educational systems.

STREAM 2: Health at the Intersections: migration, race, and inequality

Stream organizers: Sorana Toma (Public health and primary care), Ilse Derluyn (Social Work and Social Pedagogy) - Designated contact person: sorana.toma@ugent.be

This stream seeks to explore the intersections between migration and health/care, with a particular emphasis on understanding and addressing the multiple, overlapping axes of inequality that affect health as well as healthcare access and quality. Persistent ethnoracial inequalities continue to shape health outcomes and access to healthcare across the globe. Structural discrimination, socioeconomic disparities, and exclusionary policies, amongst possible other factors, contribute to unequal health risks, differential treatment within healthcare systems, and barriers to care for racialized and migrant-origin populations. Within healthcare settings, these inequalities manifest in multiple ways, from racial biases in medical research and clinical practices to disparities in health insurance coverage, preventive care and treatment quality.

Of particular interest are the intersections between migration and mental health / well-being, where displacement, trauma, racism, and systemic exclusion create compounding challenges for migrant communities. The mental health consequences of migration—from pre-migration trauma to post-migration discrimination—intersect with severely limited access to culturally appropriate mental healthcare, reflecting broader patterns of healthcare exclusion and creating cycles of psychological distress inadequately addressed by mainstream systems.

This stream will critically examine the mechanisms that sustain ethnoracial health inequalities and explore pathways toward more equitable healthcare systems and health outcomes. We are particularly interested in how structural, institutional, and interpersonal factors not only shape access to and experiences of care, but also contribute to divergent patterns of health, illness, and well-being across migrant and racialized populations. We invite contributions that address, among others :

- The intersection of migration with mental health/ well-being
- Both individual and institutional barriers to equitable healthcare
- The role of cultural and linguistic diversity in medical encounters
- Systemic and interpersonal forms of discrimination in healthcare settings
- Discrimination and bias in medical training, diagnosis, and treatment
- The role of migration status and legal frameworks in shaping healthcare entitlements
- The impact of healthcare policy on marginalized migrant groups
- Community-led health initiatives and resistance against exclusionary healthcare policies
- Decolonial and anti-racist approaches to public health and medical research

We are furthermore interested in work that reflects on the role of migration researchers in addressing these disparities, whether through policy engagement, activism or institutional change.

- How can research contribute to dismantling racism in healthcare?
- How does migration research inform policy reform, clinical practices, or community health initiatives?
- What ethical responsibilities and challenges emerge for researchers working within these sensitive and high-stakes contexts?

By inviting empirical, theoretical, and methodological contributions, this stream aspires to build a comprehensive understanding of the ways migration research can actively challenge health inequities and contribute to transformative change in healthcare systems. Researchers joining this stream are encouraged to reflect on past achievements and envision future actions to create a healthcare landscape where justice and equity for migrantized communities are central guiding principles.

STREAM 3: The multilingual borders of migration

Stream organizers: Marie Jacobs, Lotte Remue, Katrijn Maryns, Joly De Wilde (all Translation, Interpreting and Communication) - Designated contact person: m.jacobs@ugent.be

Increased mobility and migration have turned many institutional, service, and (health)care encounters into multilingual settings. Managing linguistic diversity and ensuring migrants' access to services is not self-evident. Numerous (socio)linguistic studies on these issues reveal practices of linguistic injustice, where social inequalities are (re)produced through language. While language support—such as (professional) interpreters, translators, or language technologies—can facilitate mutual understanding, these solutions also present distinct challenges, particularly in high-stakes or sensitive contexts.

This panel aims to explore the multilingual dimensions of migration and the role of language (diversity) in bordering encounters and beyond. We understand “bordering encounters” as moments where the symbolic and/or material borders of states are enacted, contested, or reinforced through language – where the in- and exclusion of certain individuals is negotiated. This includes asylum interaction, visa applications, and border checks—but also extends to spaces where access to rights, resources, and belonging is negotiated, such as integration courses, welfare offices, or healthcare settings. Additionally, the panel seeks to explore how migration research as a field and migration researchers as reflexive individuals, navigate and aim to create societal impact within these multilingual, bordering contexts. As such, the panel focuses on how research can challenge (the productivity of) such bordering practices and reflects on possible policy implications.

We invite contributions, from (socio)linguistics, translation and interpreting studies, (linguistic) ethnography, sociology of language, discourse analysis and related disciplines.

Contributions can address topics including but not limited to:

- Multilingual and/or intercultural communication in contexts involving migrants and refugees
- The mediation of migrants' voices, identities and interests in institutional/bureaucratic/service encounters
- Language support for migrants, including interpretation, translation, and the use of language technologies
- The role of language (proficiency) in access to services
- The relationship between language and integration
- The role of language and discourse in categorization and identity processes
- Emerging trends and future directions in research on language and migration.
- Reflexivity and researcher positionality in studies on language and migration.

We welcome empirical, fundamental, methodological contributions as well as insights from practitioners and policymakers in our effort to unravel the multilingual borders of migration. It is our ambition to include national as well as international perspectives.

STREAM 4: Entanglements of religion, race and migration

Stream organizers: An Van Raemdonck (Languages and cultures) and Lisa Franke (Languages and cultures) - Designated contact person: An Van Raemdonck (an.vanraemdonck@ugent.be)

Over the past decades we have witnessed various ways in which migrants become identified through religion first, rather than ethnic background, nationality or other categories. Specifically, it has been demonstrated in academic literature, by transnational agencies and civil society organisations that Muslim migrants experience how religious identity has undergone social processes of essentialization and homogenization. These developments have consequently been analyzed as the racialization of Muslims, and theorized in relation to historical and contemporary socio-political junctures (e.g. Garner and Selod 2015; Murji and Solomos 2004; Meer 2013). Literature exploring this nexus aimed to theorize societal and political change over the last decades by drawing from critical theory and critical race theory to understand contemporary manifestations of racialization and racism. However, the entanglement of religion, race and migration is observed and experienced through a variety of exclusionary practices. Migrants experience these exclusions on various levels of life, through institutional forms of discrimination as well as in everyday life. In this stream, we aim to explore migration researchers' contributions in analyzing the complexities of racialized Muslim migrants' lives.

We seek to refine our understandings of exclusionary practices sprung from the entanglement of religion, race and migration, as well as the ways in which racialized individuals design strategies to contest and navigates exclusions. We welcome contributions that are theoretical as well as empirically grounded. Similarly, we invite contributions that are based in migration work practice, or in activism. Discussions that highlight the ways in which scholarly work is in dialogue with forms of activism are particularly welcome.

Possible topics address:

- methodologies and theoretical angles specific to migration research to analyse societal developments resulting in the entanglement of religion, race and migration
- institutional forms of exclusions and methodologies and methods to study institutional exclusions
- Muslim migrants' experiences of racialization and methodologies/methods to study them
- gendered and (inter)generational experiences of racialization and institutional forms of exclusions
- activist practices addressing the racialization of Muslims
- The variety of interactions between scholarly work and activism, e.g. reflections on how research informs activism and vice versa; case studies in specific contexts; etc.
- the diversity of experiences among Muslim migrants in their everyday lives, e.g individuals from different socio-political and different religious backgrounds
- the variety of forms of practicing religion and how this affects Muslim migrants experiences of racialization
- expressions of the racialization of Muslims in language, literature or other artistic forms

These suggestions serve as examples and we warmly welcome other ways of engaging with the main theme as well.

STREAM 5: Rethinking borders, solidarity and migration law

Stream organizers: Sophie Bols (Migration Law), Ruben Wissing (Migration Law), Robin Vandevooordt (Social Work and Social Pedagogy), Ellen Desmet (Migration Law) - Designated contact person: ruben.wissing@ugent.be

Critical research in migration and refugee studies continues to expose the shortcomings and blind spots in legal, policy, and governance **frameworks and their practical implementation**. Innovative theoretical and methodological approaches – often grounded in empirical research and attentive to historical power relations – provide a foundation for reimagining (frameworks for) migration and refugee protection.

The principle of **solidarity**, which underpins relationships between states, communities and individuals, is increasingly under threat. This is particularly evident at physical, legal, and mental borders, which have become key sites of contestation. In recent years, borders have multiplied through processes of both externalisation and limiting access to welfare states. This stream invites critical contributions that **examine** how gendered, racialised, class-based and intersecting systems of oppression shape mobility, exclusion, and access to justice within migration policy. We seek papers that explore how law, policy, and bordering practices produce and reinforce inequalities through both formal and informal mechanisms of migration control. This includes externalisation, asylum procedures, return practices, welfare state bordering, and the criminalisation of migration and its supporters.

We also welcome work that proposes **alternatives**: from bottom-up, solidarity-based practices to critical theoretical perspectives and visions for future migration and border governance. We encourage reflection on how our research (re)presents and (re)produces these dynamics, both within academia and in broader society.

This stream prioritises contributions that **challenge dominant epistemologies**. We are particularly interested in research that foregrounds critical, creative, and embodied methodologies, and that bridges critical legal and policy analysis with practice-based, and creative forms of knowledge production. We also invite contributions that reflect on how researchers' positionalities shape their work, and the ethical and methodological challenges that arise when researching in contested and precarious spaces.

We welcome submissions from a wide range of **disciplinary** backgrounds, and we encourage participation from practitioners, activists, and other stakeholders. In line with the overall conference theme, we invite contributors to reflect on the societal role of critical migration research and its potential to inform social change, resistance, solidarity, and the pursuit of more equitable futures.

STREAM 6: Decolonial approaches to migration studies, narratives, practices

Stream Organizers: Elisa Robbe (Translation, Interpreting and Communication), Giacomo Orsini (Social Work and Social Pedagogy), July De Wilde (Translation, Interpreting and Communication), Alexandra Sanchez (Translation, Interpreting and Communication) - Designated contact person: Elisa.Robbe@UGent.be

Over the past decades, migration research has faced growing critique for reproducing frameworks that marginalize knowledge and experiences from the so-called Global South. In response, this stream centers decolonial approaches to migration that actively challenge dominant narratives, methodologies, and institutional hierarchies.

At the heart of this call is a commitment to the decolonial ethos embodied by the term Abya Yala, originally from the Guna people of the Darién region (now Panama and Colombia), and more recently reclaimed by activist and scholarly communities in Mexico and Central America as a decolonial response to the colonial construct of “Latin America.” Far more than a toponym, Abya Yala asserts Indigenous epistemologies and rejects imposed mapping and naming practices. This stream builds on that spirit by centering contributions rooted in the histories, languages, and lived experiences of communities across Abya Yala and other regions of the Global South, shaped by colonialism, racialization, displacement, and exclusion.

We invite scholars, artists, activists, and practitioners to critically engage with how migration and its governance are narrated, studied, and resisted, and to contest dominant perspectives and global hierarchies of knowledge production. We are particularly interested in contributions that explore the intersections of migration with storytelling, visual and performative practices, memory work, and the politics of language, including how translation and multilingualism can serve as both sites of epistemic violence and tools for decolonial resistance. Alongside these thematic concerns, we also welcome contributions that engage with participatory, community-based, or artistic forms of knowledge production, and that reflect critically on the role and responsibility of migration researchers in relation to the communities they work with.

In line with the stream’s decolonial aims, we encourage submissions in languages other than English and aim to support peer translation and interpretation. Contributors are also invited to translate this call into their own languages, not only as an act of inclusion and solidarity, but also to help broaden its reach beyond the primarily WEIRD (Western, Educated, Industrialized, Rich, Democratic) contexts in which migration research and activism often circulate.

By bringing together diverse perspectives, geographies, and formats, this stream aims to create a space for critical dialogue across academic, artistic, and activist work. In doing so, it seeks to unsettle the colonial logics that shape migration knowledge and practice, and to support more just, situated, and collaborative forms of research.

