



Legal Status Regularization, Satisfaction with Life and Gender: A Longitudinal Study of Undocumented Workers in Switzerland

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Accepted: 25 June 2025
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Abstract

Undocumented migrants face numerous challenges, including the risk of denunciation, precarious working and living conditions and discrimination. All these factors have the potential to influence their satisfaction with life. While men and women can be differently affected by those issues, data showing their influence on life satisfaction among female and male undocumented migrants are scarce. Even less is known about what happens once they have the opportunity to obtain a legal status. This paper examines the evolution of life satisfaction among undocumented migrants over time, taking into account changes in their residence status and the role of gender stratification in their contrasted life circumstances. It is based on unique longitudinal quantitative data collected over 4 waves in Geneva, Switzerland, along an exceptional regularization policy. Over the course of the study, women reported greater satisfaction with life than men despite their more adverse economic resources, housing, family and health circumstances. By using fixed and random effects models, we assess how these multiple gendered determinants along opportunities for regularization influence their respective well-being in specific ways.

Keywords Life Satisfaction · Migrants · Undocumented · Regularization · Gender

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1 Introduction

Examining subjective well-being in the context of migration offers a useful lens to better understand the relationship between changing living conditions and satisfaction with life. Migrants are driven by aspirations for a better life for themselves and their families. At the same time, migration comes with multiple challenges associated with integration into the destination country. Such a balance between benefits and hardships takes a specific form among undocumented migrants. It is known that they face particularly harsh socioeconomic circumstances while representing a selected population since only the most resilient people manage to live without a residence status over long periods of time (Aysa-Lastra & Cachón, 2015; Campbell, 2008).

Overall, their satisfaction with life is likely to be affected by multiple and possibly contradictory factors. To account for them, measuring migrants' satisfaction with life as they perceive it provides "a summary indicator of their experience of the objective and subjective benefits and costs of migration that truly matter to them" (Hendriks & Bartram, 2019, p. 289). Indeed, the relationship between happiness and material circumstances is not linear; hence, subjective evaluations of well-being are now commonly included in research and population statistical monitoring, considering that people's own subjective assessments are important (Bartram, 2011; Nikolova & Graham, 2020).

In addition, migration is affected by gender mechanisms (Calavita, 2006; World Health Organization, 2017). In both origin and destination countries, gender stratification shapes different opportunities and trajectories, through the uneven distribution of resources, notably regarding employment, domestic work and education, defining systematic hierarchies between men and women in social institutions as well as in social practices (Danaj, 2016), and multiple inequalities accumulating over the life course (Fasang & Aisenbrey, 2021). In particular, demands for domestic work in high-income countries attract women from lower-income regions seeking opportunities to improve their own families' circumstances. Hence gender stratification matters as regard motives for migration and opportunities in destination countries (Christou & Kofman, 2022). Notably, gender inequalities in labor markets, family involvement, and access to economic resources can be drivers of female migration, but such inequalities may still affect living conditions after migration. The integration of undocumented men and women is thus influenced by their contrasted personal aspirations, job opportunities and new forms of gender stratification.

This paper investigates the impact of various dimensions related to gender stratification on the transformation of subjective well-being over time among undocumented men and women exposed to the possibility of regularization. In the context of a unique regularization policy – Papyrus program – in the canton of Geneva, Switzerland, we tracked changes in socioeconomic and health conditions of 468 undocumented, applying or newly regularized migrants in a panel study (Jackson et al., 2019). This panel study is focused on undocumented workers who migrated primarily for economic reasons, a group distinct from refugees and asylum seekers who fled war or persecution, although these categories can sometimes overlap. This latter group of migrants presents rather low satisfaction with life, explained by their traumatic journeys and accumulated vulnerability (Myhrvold & Småstuen, 2019). In contrast, newly regularized migrants in our study showed a rather high level of satisfaction with life at baseline, almost equivalent to that of the regular resident population (Burton-Jeangros et al., 2021). In this paper, we take advantage of the longitudinal

design of the study to analyze the evolution of satisfaction with life over time considering the opportunities for regularization that were then opened while taking into account effects of gender stratification on transformations in life and health conditions in this population.

In the cohort of migrant workers we studied, women were occupying lower paid jobs, often in the domestic sector, had poorer housing conditions while being more often engaged in transnational family ties than men (Refle et al., 2024). Against this background, our research question is as follows: does a change in legal status impact men and women's subjective satisfaction with life in different ways considering the associated transformations of their life circumstances? In other words, we are interested in gendered differences in the evaluation of life satisfaction during the process of regularization and whether underlying processes specific to men and women can be identified. After reviewing the literature to theorize the multiple mechanisms affecting well-being, we present longitudinal analyses on the cohort followed in the Parchemins study between 2017 and 2022 (Jackson et al., 2019).

2 Migrant well-being, Gender and Legal Status

Multiple factors (economic inequalities, labor opportunities, war and value regimes) influence migration paths between countries. Consequently, migrants are very heterogeneous with multiple motivations and socioeconomic characteristics. In addition, receiving countries diverge in their policies and attitudes toward migration, ranging between restrictive systems such as Switzerland, where access to state services is bound to residence permits, and local programs and infrastructures, which offer wider access to state services to undocumented migrants. Similarly, the extent of the prosecution of undocumented migrants differs across nations, leading to different levels of clandestinity (Kraler, 2019). Against this background, how can we assess whether undocumented migrants meet their expectations once they have migrated?

Subjective well-being has been acknowledged as a relevant summary measure encompassing multiple and potentially contradictory influences on migrant trajectories by providing a standardized measure of how an individual appreciates the balance between the benefits and costs of his or her migration trajectory (Hendriks & Bartram, 2019). Indeed, quality of life indicators account for “the gap between individuals’ actual situation and that to which they aspire.” (Fry, 2000, p. 256), thus considering the heterogeneity of their aspirations and situations, especially in the context of migration (Obi et al., 2023).

Regarding the relationship between gender and satisfaction with life, general population studies provide inconclusive results (Della Giusta et al., 2011) as well as those dedicated to migrants (Ambrosetti & Paparusso, 2021; Landesmann & Mara, 2013). Men and women's evaluations of life satisfaction might be related to distinct aspects of life, along with contrasted forms of gender stratification across societies. As a result of differentiated socialization patterns, men and women's expectations of life are likely to differ (Della Giusta et al., 2011). Furthermore, previous research has suggested that instrumental aspects of life might particularly affect men, while women would be more affected by social and emotional dimensions (Shichman & Cooper, 1984). In other words, men might be more specifically affected by work-related factors, while women are in general more engaged in social relationships (Akokuwebe et al., 2023; Becchetti & Conzo, 2022). These findings reflect gender

differences in investments across life domains, notably work and family, which permeates migration trajectories (Bonizzoni, 2017).

Indeed, gender stratification also underlies migrants' aspirations and circumstances. In migration studies, women are foremost approached as care workers, domestic workers or family members across national borders (Fresnoza-Flot, 2022; Kofman & Raghuram, 2022). In that respect, transnational ties are expected to be important in their assessments of well-being, still these relations are often overlooked in empirical studies (Horn & Fokkema, 2020). Furthermore, the consequences of transnational ties can be ambivalent. On the one hand, transnational motherhood implies long separation periods from children and emotional hardship, including feelings of guilt for migrant women (Horn & Fokkema, 2020), thus having a negative impact on their well-being. At the same time, migration provides benefits through remittances regularly sent to family members in the country of origin, potentially improving the quality of life of both receivers and senders. The capacity to maintain transnational ties through visits has also proven beneficial for well-being (Ambrosetti & Paparusso, 2021).

Migrants are further impacted by gender stratification in regard to their position in the destination country. On the one hand, labor relations are influenced by gender: across countries, women more often occupy low-qualified and precarious jobs and are on average less paid than men (Talahite, 2010). These global inequities are reinforced by a gendered division of labor along which unprivileged migrant women from lower income countries are typically employed in domestic work (Christou & Kofman, 2022). On the other hand, migration toward more gender-egalitarian countries can result in men having a reduced status and diminished privileges compared to the position they occupied in their country of origin. For women, migration is likely to offer them greater autonomy in the conduct of their life, especially in more gender-egalitarian contexts, and thus be favorable for their satisfaction with life (Ambrosetti & Paparusso, 2021).

Considering the evolution of satisfaction with life over time can help assess how these multiple contradictory influences play out in migrants' lives. To that end, cross-sectional studies consider length of stay in the destination country (Heizmann & Böhnke, 2019), while longitudinal studies assess the development of life satisfaction during different co-occurring life events (Lönngqvist et al., 2015). It has been reported that migrant satisfaction with life is greater in the postmigration phase, qualifying it as a honeymoon phase (Heizmann & Böhnke, 2019). However, in the longer run, the results remain inconclusive: some suggest that satisfaction with life increases with the time spent in the destination country, while others show that the improved quality of life observed in the aftermath of migration stagnates later (Ambrosetti & Paparusso, 2021). This stagnation could reflect the gap between premigration expectations and actual living conditions in the destination country (Olgiati et al., 2013), resulting in 'frustrated achievers' reporting a decline in satisfaction with life over time despite their increasing income. Furthermore, research has underscored the nonlinear relationship between age and wellbeing, with middle-aged people being the least satisfied (Ambrosetti & Paparusso, 2021; Olgiati et al., 2013).

The evolution of satisfaction with life might also reflect changing comparison groups over time, a process of particular relevance for migrant workers. It is suggested that migrants first compare their living conditions with those of people in their country of origin, while their reference point might progressively shift toward people living in the country of destination (Baykara-Krumme & Platt, 2018; Hendriks & Bartram, 2019). This would represent a move

from a downward comparison, with people in the country of origin less well off on average than migrants, toward an upward comparison, with people in the destination country experiencing overall better social circumstances. This could also account for the stagnation of satisfaction with life over time.

A number of additional factors are observed to matter for migrant satisfaction with life. Material conditions are important, particularly in the early stages of migration when well-being is associated with income levels (Olgiati et al., 2013; Paloma et al., 2021), especially for migrants coming from poorer countries. A number of studies have shown that better health status and social integration, as measured by social support, discrimination or community engagement, are associated with greater satisfaction with life (Paloma et al., 2021).

In addition to these contrasting mechanisms underlying satisfaction with life at the individual level, it is important to assess the role of structural determinants of well-being, i.e., how policies affect migrant well-being. A study conducted across European countries by Heizmann and Böhnke (2019) revealed that inclusive integration policies are associated with greater life satisfaction among migrants. More specifically, being regularized has proven beneficial for undocumented migrants' wellbeing (Ambrosetti & Paparusso, 2021; Burton-Jeangros et al., 2021; Paloma et al., 2021). This is likely to reflect the alleviation of multiple pressures related to the absence of a legal status, including the fear of being deported and criminalized. It also equates with the regained possibility of traveling across borders, a mobility allowing one to visit family members, including children who stayed in the country of origin (Consoli et al., 2022b). Thus, obtaining a residence status could represent a second 'honeymoon' in the migration trajectory, following a first enchanted period occurring after arriving in the destination country (Heizmann & Böhnke, 2019).

Currently, intersectional analyses are advocated to stress that social categories, when comparing men and women, for example, are far from homogenous (Kapilashrami & Han-kivsky, 2018). This has special significance in the context of undocumented migration, in which multiple systems of stratification— including gender, economic inequalities, ethnic origins, and migration regimes— affect individuals through various forms of vulnerability and discrimination (Hossin, 2020). However, intersectional analyses require rather large samples to take multiple dimensions simultaneously into account. Our longitudinal dataset of a cohort of undocumented migrants does not allow us to do this; nevertheless, this paper aims to disentangle the distinct influences of a number of determinants of satisfaction with life on undocumented men and women. We assess whether obtaining a residence status corresponds to a 'second honeymoon' in migration trajectories, along the associated changing socioeconomic, housing and health conditions, transnational ties and integration in Switzerland, all of which are gender specific.

3 Methods

We use panel data collected between 2017 and 2022 by the Parchemins study, set in the framework of the regularization program "Papyrus" implemented in the Swiss canton of Geneva (Jackson et al., 2019). Undocumented migrants could apply for a residence status if they met the following criteria: (1) a stay of at least 10 years in Geneva, or 5 years for those having at least one child attending a local public school; (2) basic proficiency in the local language, i.e., French, as an indication of social integration; (3) sufficient finan-

cial resources; (4) being employed; and (5) not having any criminal record other than due to their undocumented stay. Thereby, the Papyrus program was rather selective and only allowed migrants with long-term stay to be regularized if all the criteria were met.

For the Parchemins study, migrants aged at least 18 years, without a valid residency status or having already obtained one as part of the Papyrus program and originating from countries outside the European Union or the European Free Trade Association were recruited. They had to have lived in Geneva for at least 3 years and to plan to stay for at least another 3 years. At the beginning of the study, some had already obtained a legal status, others had applied to the Papyrus program or were preparing their application, while others did not meet the required criteria or were unwilling to apply. We collected longitudinal data over four waves (W1: 2017/2018, W2: 2018/2019, W3: 2020/2021 (in between the second and third COVID-19 pandemic peaks in Switzerland), W4: 2021/2022). Asylum seekers were excluded as they were not eligible for the Papyrus program.

The participants were recruited through nongovernmental organizations (trade unions, caritative associations) offering support to undocumented migrants in Geneva, notably help to fill an application for Papyrus program and a local medical facility dedicated to this population. The initial sample in Wave 1 included 468 migrants subsequently followed over the four successive data collection waves. Panel data on undocumented and newly regularized migrants are very scarce due to their high mobility, which hinders research on this population (Matlin et al., 2018). This is reflected in the attrition of the sample, ranging between 17% and 19% between waves for a total of 44% over the 4 waves (Fig. 1).

Analyses compare three groups along the gradual process of regularization: those who were recently regularized (since 2017 in the context of Papyrus program), those who remained undocumented throughout the study, and an intermediary category of applicants. In this latter group, some remained for lengthy periods of time in a liminal zone, having

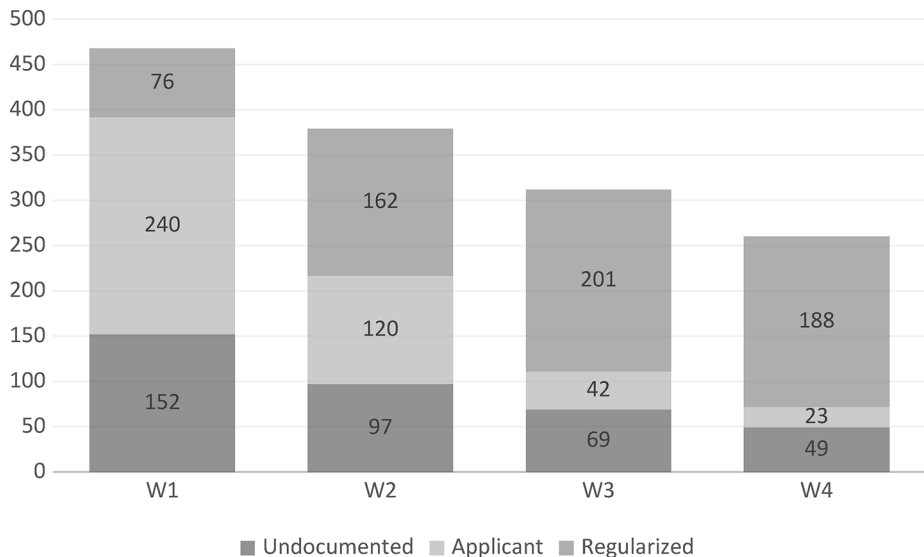


Fig. 1 Number of participants by wave and migrant status. Note = Regularized includes those who already obtained a permit, applicant includes those who started the application procedure, undocumented migrants are those that did not/could not apply

applied for a residence permit but waiting sometimes up to 2 years (because of administrative delays), to receive the residence permit. With their application, they had obtained a temporary authorization allowing them to travel and relieving the pressure of deportation risks. Figure 1 provides an overview of the changing distribution of the three categories over the course of the study. This categorization indicates that regularization was in many cases a stepwise process and consequentially likely to differently influence life satisfaction.

The data were collected face-to-face through standardized questionnaires covering different life domains, including migration trajectory, work and economic conditions, housing, health and social integration. Instruments were adjusted over the four waves, but core questions remained identical to be able to assess change over time. The study was approved by the Geneva Canton Ethics Committee before the initiation of fieldwork, all participants provided written informed consent.

In line with the longitudinal perspective, we provide descriptive statistics on the changes across the four waves of data collection and supplement the analysis with fixed and random effect models to assess the factors associated with changes in life satisfaction across the three categories of migrants. Besides, considering the contrasted compositions of female participants—mostly engaged in domestic work, originating from far away countries and having left children behind—and male participants—engaged in other work sectors, from less distant countries and with less family ties, we assess the role of determinants of satisfaction with life by using split files for men and women, as done by other researchers (for example Wernli & Zella, 2018). All analyses were performed in Stata 17.

The cognitive dimension of participants' well-being was assessed with a question on overall satisfaction with life. It was measured on a 10-point scale (0 = not satisfied at all, 10 = completely satisfied) in all 4 waves and was used as the dependent variable for regression models.

In line with other research, age and age squared were tested due to the nonlinear relationship between age and well-being (Ambrosetti & Paparusso, 2021; Olgiati et al., 2013). However, age-squared was dropped for the following reason: due to the requirements of the regularization procedure with only working migrants being eligible for regularization, only a few migrants have either low or very high age, meaning that we are not able to observe any possible nonlinear relationship. Nevertheless, it is to keep in mind that the population mostly comprises middle-agers whose life satisfaction values are in general lower compared to younger/older age groups.

To assess social integration, duration of stay (number of years spent in Geneva) and being in a couple (yes/no) were included. Residence status was assessed in 3 modalities: regularized, applicant for regularization and undocumented. Living conditions were measured by the capacity to pay an unexpected bill of 1500.- CHF (yes/no) and the density of housing (number of people per bedroom), both of which reflect financial resources. Two indicators were used to measure health: multimorbidity, based on the number of chronic diseases reported, and mental health, as assessed by the PHQ scale, which measures self-reported depressive symptoms. Transnational ties were approached with two indicators: visits to the country of origin since settling in Switzerland (yes/no) and by remittances sent (yes/no). Undocumented migrants take a risk when crossing borders as they might not be able to come back, hence some prefer not to go back home as long as they do not have proper documentation. Others still take the risk. Applying for regularization already grants the possibility to travel outside Swiss borders.

We proceeded in five steps. First, we ran a limited model on the complete sample where we tested whether sex shows generally significant for explaining life satisfaction since the sample is heavily biased toward women who represented more than 70% of respondents. As this was the case, we proceeded with another simple model that included all participants in the study, and we checked the influence of regularization only. Third, we added an interaction variable of sex and regularization, which is used as robustness check to verify on whether the gendered effect persists when adding an interaction of both variables. Fourth we ran an extensive model including variables expected to influence life satisfaction. Fifth, we created a split file and ran the analysis for women and men separately, with limited and extensive models. This was done with the assumption that mechanisms underlying the evolution of satisfaction with life are different for men and women, as suggested by gender stratification mechanisms. As the *n* for men is low, we would otherwise either need many interaction effects between items or would only observe effects on women. To take into account the particularly important impact of the COVID-19 pandemic on participants observed throughout investigated life domains (Burton-Jeangros et al., 2020), we controlled for the data collection wave (specifically for wave 3 when COVID-19-related changes occurred).

4 Results

After describing the sample characteristics in wave 1 of data collection and their transformation over time, as well as the evolution of satisfaction across the data collection waves, the fixed and random effect models use the complete longitudinal data.

4.1 Participants Characteristics

Over two-thirds of the participants were women, which reflects the characteristics of undocumented workers in the canton of Geneva, as assessed by professionals working with this population. The women and men we recruited presented quite contrasting characteristics at the beginning of the study (Table 1). The former mostly originated from South America, followed by Southeast Asia, whereas men presented more diverse origins. On average, women were older (45 years) than men (41 years), but all participants had lived for a rather long period in Geneva, on average more than 11 years, without differences between men and women. Women less often reported having a partner (41% versus 64%). Domestic work was the main domain of employment of the participants and was mostly occupied by women (90% of them), while men were more often employed in the construction and hospitality sectors. The latter less frequently sent remittances to their country of origin than women (56% versus 70%), and they were also more likely to be able to respond to an unexpected bill than women.

Men and women's contrasted levels of economic resources can be observed in their housing conditions. The former reported living in less dense housing than women who could less easily afford more spacious accommodations. Visits to the country of origin were more frequent for men than for women; this could reflect men's greater economic resources but also the fact that they more often originate from countries, notably in Eastern Europe, that makes it more feasible to travel back and forth in the absence of a residence permit (Consoli et al.,

Table 1 Characteristics of participants at baseline (Wave 1)

	Total	Women	Men
Age (Median (Std-Dev)), N	44.1 (10.5), 468	45.4 (10.6), 337	40.8 (9.5), 131
In couple (% , N)	47%, 468	41%, 337	64%, 131
Region of origin (% , N)			
Eastern Europe	8.6%, 40	0.9%, 3	28.5%, 37
Latin America	64.0%, 299	71.5%, 241	44.6%, 58
Africa	7.5%, 35	4.7%, 16	14.6%, 19
East Asia	19.9%, 93	22.8%, 77	12.3%, 16
Duration in Geneva in years (Median (Std-Dev)), N	11.7 (5.4), 467	11.8 (5.2), 337	11.5 (5.8), 130
Sectors of activity (% , N)			
Domestic Work	71.9%, 297	89.7%, 278	18.4%, 19
Construction	6.5%, 27	0.0%, 0	26.2%, 27
Hotel & Restaurant	9.2%, 38	2.6%, 8	29.1%, 30
Other tertiary	7.5%, 31	3.5%, 11	19.4%, 20
Several sectors	4.8%, 20	4.2%, 13	6.8%, 7
Remittances (% yes, N)	65.9%, 463	69.7%, 333	56.2%, 130
Capacity to pay unexpected bill (% yes, N)	33.9%, 466	30.7%, 335	42.0%, 131
Housing density (habitants/nb of bedrooms) (% , N)			
0.1–0.8	14.8%, 68	14.3%, 48	16.0%, 20
0.81 to 1.5	38.9%, 179	34.9%, 117	49.6%, 62
1.51 or higher	46.3%, 213	50.7%, 170	34.4%, 43
Return to country of origin since settling in Switzerland (% yes, N)	51.9%, 243	50.1%, 337	56.5%, 131
Multimorbidity (Median (Std-Dev)), N	1.6 (1.5), 458	1.7 (1.5), 337	1.2 (1.3), 129
PHQ (Median (Std.-Dev)), N	5.4 (4.8), 466	5.8 (5.0), 336	4.5 (4.1), 130

2022b). Women reported more health problems than men, as measured by multimorbidity and depressive symptoms.

Over the course of the study (Table A1 in appendix), men could more often find a partner, with the proportion of those being in couple increasing from 64 to 74%, while more than half of the women remained single throughout the study. The latter remained disadvantaged with respect to their housing situation and economic resources over time: the proportions of women sending remittances (about 2 thirds) and having the capacity to pay an unexpected bill (less than one third) remained stable, while among men, the proportion sending remittances and being able to pay an unexpected bill both increased (from 56 to 68% and 42 to 49% respectively). Over the course of the panel waves, women remained more often employed in the domestic sector, but with a progressive diversification of their employment by e.g. also working for a cleaning company. The gap between women and men's multimorbidity increased over time, while it decreased regarding mental health as men reported more symptoms in waves 3 and 4, which took place after the COVID-19 pandemic.

4.2 Life Satisfaction Over the Course of the Study

Life satisfaction was on average higher among women across the duration of the study (Fig. 2), with their average score across waves reaching 7.66 compared to 7.19 for men. There were greater fluctuations among women across waves, especially during the COVID-19 pandemic, as observed in Wave 3. The life satisfaction of undocumented women averaged 7.15 across all waves versus 5.92 for undocumented men, while the gender gap among regularized participants was small (7.97 for women versus 7.87 for men). Applicants were situated in average at 7.24 for men and 7.53 for women.

4.3 Determinants of Changes in Satisfaction with Life Over time

We then ran fixed and random effects model on the complete and separate samples. When integrating determinants of satisfaction with life for the complete sample (Table A2 in appendix), we tested Hausman (results indicated under the models). For transparency, all models are shown, and the excluded models are grayed.

In the full sample (Table A2 in appendix), the most important effects on changes in satisfaction with life were having obtained a residence status or having applied over the course of the study and an increased capacity to pay an unexpected bill. All three were significantly associated with an increase in satisfaction with life. In contrast, becoming single was negatively associated with life satisfaction, and deteriorating mental health also had a detrimental impact. As expected, the restrictions imposed by the COVID-19 pandemic in 2020 and 2021—as measured in wave 3—had a negative effect on satisfaction with life. Variables measuring transnational ties— sending remittances and visiting the country of origin— were not associated with the outcome, housing conditions and multimorbidity neither. We equally tested the interaction between regularization and sex which was significant in all the models, while sex and change in residence status remained significant too, increasing the confidence in our interpretation on the differences between men and women. While the negative coef-

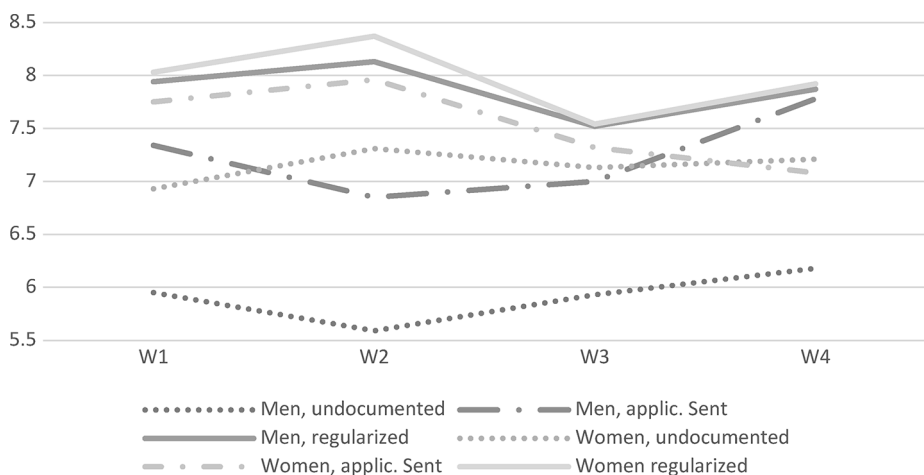


Fig. 2 Life satisfaction by migrant status & gender. N: Men Undocumented/Applicant/Regularized: W1: 42/71/16, W2: 22/40/40 W3: 14/16/50 W4: 11/9/46. Women Undocumented/Applicant/Regularized: W1: 108/165/59, W2: 75/80/121 W3: 54/25/150, W4: 38/13/142

ficient of the interaction variable suggests that for example a change in legal status has less impact on women's satisfaction with life, we stay cautious in interpreting these results as the n is particularly low for men. This justifies to present findings on split files.

Table 2 shows results obtained from models run on split files. Compared to the results above, we this time tested the effect of regularization status specifically. For women, fixed and random effects are interpreted for the simple model, but only fixed effects for the complete model. The simple model reveals that while life satisfaction is higher among women who applied for regularization or those who received their residence permit in the random effects model, this cannot be interpreted as a direct effect of regularization, as these factors are not significant in the fixed effects model. Or to put it differently, these women's higher satisfaction is due to other factors— that might be related to the process of regularization though— while it is not regularization or application itself that makes them happier. The complete model, only interpreted for fixed effects, shows that a better capacity over time to pay an unexpected bill had the greatest positive impact on their life satisfaction. In contrast, a decline in mental health over time had a negative effect, even though small. The impact of the pandemic remained clearly significant with a negative impact on their well-being.

Among men (Table 2), both fixed and random effects can be interpreted. The process of regularization plays the most important role in improving their satisfaction with life, with significant and elevated effects in both random and fixed effects. Even in the simple model, approximately 5% of the intraindividual variance is explained by changes in resi-

Table 2 Random and fixed effects regression models on life satisfaction (two separate samples)

	Women				Men			
	Random effects GLS regression		Fixed effects GLS regression		Random effects GLS regression		Fixed effects GLS regression	
	Coef.	Coef.	Coef.	Coef.	Coef.	Coef.	Coef.	Coef.
Residence status - Application sent ^a	.64***	.29	.41	.30	1.24***	.41	1.14**	.84*
Residence status - Regularized ^a	.62***	.35*	.28	.32	1.72***	.96**	1.51**	1.22**
Age at baseline				(omitted)		-.00		(omitted)
Capacity to pay an unexpected bill (1500CHF)		.50***		.52**		.53*		.34
Duration in Geneva		.00		(omitted)		-.02		(omitted)
Multi-morbidity (prevalence of several diseases)		-.07		-.09		-.05		.03
Housing index (No. of persons/rooms)		-.32		-.07		-.31**		-.26
Return to country of origin		.13		.16		.12		.07
Sending money		-.05		-.09		.19		.16
Single (no partner)		-.37**		-.24		-.37		-.54
PHQ score		-.10***		-.07***		-.14***		-.10***
Covid-wave (w3)		-.31**		-.34**		-.00		-.02
Constant	7.18***	7.66***	7.42***	8.18***	6.04***	7.88***	6.12***	7.20***
No. Of observations	1030	1026	1030	1026	377	360	377	360
Individuals	335	334	335	334	129	123	129	123
r-squared ⁺	.05	.25	.00	.08	.13	.40	.05	.13

Notes: *** $p < 0.001$, ** $p < 0.01$, * $p < 0.05$. Dependent variable: Likert Scale 0–10, multi-morbidity additive scale of no. of chronic diseases, housing index: no. of persons in household/number of livable rooms, PHQ-9 score as additive scale, reference category for residence status a = undocumented ⁺ = r^2 between for RE, within for FE. All models are generalized least square regressions (GLS)

The Hausman test is not significant for men (p-value 0.53 for simple model and 0.17 for model with all variables). For women the Hausman test was not significant when including only regularization (p-value 0.07), but significant when including all variables (chi2 19.57, p-value 0.03) and a FE model is preferred. For transparency both analyses are shown and the excluded one is greyed

Note=Regularized includes those who already got a permit, applicant includes those who started the application procedure, undocumented migrants are those that did not/could not apply

dence status. When additional factors are included, the increase in satisfaction at the time the application is sent still has an important and significant effect. In the complete model, both poor mental health and declining mental health negatively impacted satisfaction with life, an effect slightly more important than among women. Men's capacity to pay an unexpected bill was significant in random effect models, but not its fluctuations over time. This may be interpreted as an effect of their more stable financial situation compared to women across the four waves. Housing conditions were also significant for men in the random effect models, meaning that those living in less dense housing reported greater life satisfaction. In contrast, their satisfaction with life was not impacted by the effects of the COVID-19 pandemic in Wave 3.

5 Discussion & Conclusion

Adopting a longitudinal perspective, this paper examines what factors impact changes in satisfaction with life of three groups of migrants: undocumented migrants, those applying for regularization and regularized ones. We observed that the evolution of satisfaction with life is significantly associated with sex and interacts with legal status. We consequentially ran separate models for men and women to assess how various determinants, and their transformations, could influence the evolution of well-being over time.

The longitudinal perspective adopted here shows that changes in legal status and transformations in some life domains (economic resources and health) affect the evolution of life satisfaction. Taking into account the contrasted characteristics of undocumented men and women working in Geneva, our findings confirm the role of gender stratification mechanisms, as women remain disadvantaged in all life domains and over time when compared to men. At the same time, while they are more satisfied with life than men, the particularly large gender gap among undocumented participants was reduced over the process of regularization, as regularized and applicant men came to similar levels of satisfaction with life as regularized women. Our results confirm the relation between mental health and satisfaction with life (Ojeda & Piña-Watson, 2013), among both men and women. Data collected in the Parchemins study indeed emphasized the extent of anxiety and stress among the study participants as a result of years spent without a legal resident status (Refle et al., 2023). However, the impact of changing depression levels on satisfaction with life remained moderate in the regression models.

Material circumstances also matter, as shown in other studies (Olgiati et al., 2013; Paloma et al., 2021), with a substantial effect. The positive effect of the capacity to pay an unexpected bill on well-being is important for both women and men. Women reported higher satisfaction with life when their economic capacity increased while men's satisfaction was related to their status and not changes in resources. For people with low incomes—as our study participants—material resources are directly related to satisfaction with life, while in wealthier populations, their effect levels off (Bartram, 2011; Nikolova & Graham, 2020).

Regularization, as a structural predictor of quality of life, proves particularly beneficial for men, suggesting a 'second honeymoon' for them (Heizmann & Böhnke, 2019). Gaining a residence permit, a symbol of a new social status in the country of destination, justifies their efforts over long years of clandestine life, not only improving their working conditions but also opening new opportunities for their future in Switzerland. However, regularization

does not directly affect women's well-being. Regularized women's higher satisfaction with life is due to improvements in other factors. The declining satisfaction of applicant women in later stages of the study (Fig. 2) might reflect their preoccupation with their intermediate status, suggesting some future stability but remaining unsettled. For female migrants, obtaining a residence permit brings opportunities for diversification in employment but it does not provide much change in their working conditions and their economic capacity (Refle et al., 2024).

The differentiated impact of regularization might also reflect men's and women's distinct engagement towards the country of destination. Men migrate earlier than women in their life course and thus more frequently plan to build their family life in the country of destination. The negative relation between satisfaction with life and housing conditions among men, on the one hand, and the positive relation with their economic capacity, on the other hand, might reflect the greater importance of instrumental or material values for them (Shichman & Cooper, 1984). These relations can also be seen as an illustration of the notion of 'frustrated achievers' described by Olgiati et al. (2013): housing and economic circumstances are important conditions for settling in Switzerland, improvements in these domains thus appear as a legitimate aspiration among men who migrated earlier in their life course.

With regard to women's satisfaction with life, the absence of an effect of their changing housing conditions and residence status might reflect their capacity to endure sacrifice with a less clear project toward the country of destination. Since many of them left their children in their country of origin, they might be more ambivalent about their future in Switzerland than men. In other words, structural determinants of satisfaction with life, as measured by residence status, would mostly matter when one plans to stay, which is not systematic among migrants. Indeed, many came with the idea of staying only for a limited time and ended up spending longer periods abroad as a result of encountered opportunities (Consoli et al., 2022a).

At the same time, it comes as a surprise that our analyses show no impact of changes in transnational ties—as measured by remittances and visits to the country of origin—on satisfaction with life for either men or women. While persisting relations with the home nation remain intact for most migrants even after living in Switzerland for at least a decade, our analyses reveal no effect of mounting financial challenges in the host country. These particularly affect those who face new financial charges after gaining a residence permit (e.g. taxes). Overall, we might conclude that conditions in the host country are more meaningful for evaluations of satisfaction with life than distant ties, especially among a migrant population who has resided in Switzerland for a rather long period.

The severe impact of the COVID-19 pandemic on women may be related to their pre-existing vulnerability and low income gained in the domestic sector, which was exacerbated during that period. COVID-19 restrictions in 2020–2021 affected their capacity to earn previous levels of income (Burton-Jeangros et al., 2020), putting additional economic and psychological pressure on them. This context was indeed characterized by multiple uncertainties for domestic workers and by increased difficulties in accessing public or non-governmental support for such populations. In contrast, men's greater preexisting economic resources and more formal relations in the labor market might have protected them from the impact of the health crisis.

While our analyses helped identify how some changes in life circumstances influence the well-being of long-time undocumented male and female workers differently,

none of these factors helps to understand women's overall greater satisfaction with life. A similar gender pattern in satisfaction with life has been observed elsewhere, even though women report more daily stress or depression than men (Akokuwebe et al., 2023; Becchetti & Conzo, 2022). While the notion of a gender gap in satisfaction with life has been recently challenged (Blanchflower & Bryson, 2024), our study suggests that this gap still exists among migrant workers, especially among the most vulnerable undocumented ones. Migration exposes people to different systems of gender stratification, and it could be hypothesized that women's higher satisfaction with life, despite their harsh life circumstances (notably limited economic capacity, distance from their children left in the country of origin), reflects the fact that they now live in less gender-stratified environments, compared to their country of origin, and in social contexts that promote their personal agency. Some studies report declining life satisfaction of women over recent years, a trend explained by the gap between formal promotion of gender equality and persisting inequalities in social practices, which keep women from reaching their aspirations for equality despite its constant promotion in public policies (Araki & Olivos, 2025). In that respect, our findings suggest that these structural elements are important since undocumented women, independent of their legal status over time and their economic conditions, overall rate their satisfaction with life as high, when summing up their life circumstances and comparing them to what they think these would have been or would be had they remained in their country of origin.

Next to the insights brought by our results based on a unique longitudinal database of undocumented migrants undergoing regularization, limitations of our findings must be acknowledged. Our sample size, especially for men, decreased across the four waves of data collection. This clearly limits our capacity to test gender differences and even more to use an intersectional perspective that would allow us to take into account multiple forms of stratification simultaneously. In addition, the potential bias in random effect estimators for the total sample and among women makes a complete comparison between subsamples difficult. It must also be emphasized that the participants show very context-specific characteristics, i.e., they are migrants who had lived for several years in Geneva when exposed to the exceptional Papyrus program. Furthermore, they possessed high levels of individual capacity to cope with complex daily life problems as well as a high level of personal resilience. In this sense, the findings cannot be generalized to the complete population of undocumented migrants.

To conclude, women reported greater satisfaction with life than men did, despite their more disadvantaged socioeconomic circumstances. For them, the balance of the costs and benefits of migration thus remains overall more favorable than for men, amidst the multiple contradictory influences shaping their satisfaction with life. Regularization of legal status positively affected men's satisfaction with life, representing a second honeymoon in their migration trajectories, probably matching their aspiration to settle in Switzerland. The absence of such a direct effect among women could reflect that for them obtaining a residence permit has less immediate benefits with respect to income, working and housing conditions and that they are more ambivalent about their plans for the future.

Appendix

Table A1 Characteristics of participants

	W1			W2			W3			W4		
	Total	Women	Men	Total	Women	Men	Total	Women	Men	Total	Women	Men
Age (Median (Std-Dev)), N	44.1 (10.5), 468	45.4 (10.6), 337	40.8 (9.5), 131	45.7 (10.5), 379	46.8 (10.6), 277	42.8 (9.6), 102	47.2 (10.7), 312	48.1 (10.7), 232	44.6 (10.1), 80	47.8 (10.7), 260	48.4 (10.7), 194	45.8 (10.5), 66
In couple (%), N	47%, 468	41%, 337	64%, 131	50%, 379	43%, 277	68%, 102	48%, 312	40%, 232	71%, 80	50%, 260	42%, 194	74%, 66
Region of origin (%), (n)												
Eastern Europe	8.6% (40)	0.9% (3)	28.5% (37)	7.1% (27)	0.7% (2)	24.5% (25)	6.1% (19)	0.4% (1)	22.5% (18)	12 (4.6%)	0 (0%)	18.2% (12)
Latin America	64.0% (299)	71.5% (241)	44.6% (58)	66.2% (251)	71.8% (199)	51.0% (52)	66.3% (207)	70.7% (164)	53.8% (43)	70% (182)	73.7% (143)	59.1% (39)
Africa	7.5% (35)	4.7% (16)	14.6% (19)	5.8% (22)	4.3% (12)	9.8% (10)	5.8% (18)	5.2% (12)	7.5% (6)	6.2% (16)	5.7% (11)	7.6% (5)
East Asia	19.9% (93)	22.8% (77)	12.3% (16)	20.8% (79)	23.1% (64)	14.7% (15)	21.8% (68)	23.7% (55)	16.3% (13)	50 (19.2%)	20.6% (40)	15.2% (10)
Duration in Geneva in years at baseline W7 (Median (Std-Dev)), N	11.7 (5.4), 467	11.8 (5.2), 337	11.5 (5.8), 130	12.0 (5.2), 378	12.0 (5.0), 277	11.9 (5.8), 101	12.0 (5.3), 311	12.0 (5.1), 232	11.8 (6.0), 79	11.7 (5.0), 259	11.8 (5.0), 149	11.6 (5.2), 65
Sectors of activity (%), n												
Domestic Work	71.9%, 297	89.7%, 278	18.4%, 19	67%, 231	82.7%, 215	18.8%, 16	69%, 189	83.3%, 175	21.9%, 14	56.7%, 135	68.8%, 16	9%, 16
Construction	6.5%, 27	0.0%, 0	26.2%, 27	7.5%, 26	0%, 0	30.6%, 26	6.2%, 17	0%, 0	26.6%, 17	6.7%, 16	0%, 0	27.1%, 16
Hotel & Restaurant	9.2%, 38	2.6%, 8	29.1%, 30	6.1%, 21	0.8%, 2	22.4%, 19	6.2%, 17	1.4%, 3	21.9%, 14	7.6%, 18	3.4%, 6	20.3%, 12
Other tertiary	7.5%, 31	3.5%, 11	19.4%, 20	10.1%, 35	7.3%, 19	18.8%, 16	8.8%, 24	4.8%, 10	21.9%, 14	16%, 38	12.3%, 22	27.1%, 16

Table A1 (continued)

	W1			W2			W3			W4		
	Total	Women	Men	Total	Women	Men	Total	Women	Men	Total	Women	Men
Several sectors	4.8%, 20 463	4.2%, 13	6.8%, 7	9.3%, 32	9.2%, 24	9.4%, 8	9.8%, 27	10.5%, 22	7.7%, 5	13%, 31	15.5%, 26	8.6%, 5
Remittances (% yes, N)	65.9%, 463	69.7%, 333	56.2%, 130	67.5%, 379	68.2%, 277	65.7%, 102	66.9%, 311	68.8%, 228	61.3%, 80	67.2%, 259	67.4%, 193	66.7%, 66
Capacity to pay unexpected bill (% yes, N)	33.9%, 466	30.7%, 335	42.0%, 131	34.3%, 379	28.5%, 277	50.0%, 102	31.2%, 311	27.7%, 231	41.3%, 80	33.1%, 260	27.8%, 194	48.5%, 66
Housing density (habitants/nb of bedrooms) (% , n)												
0.1–0.8	14.8%, 68	14.3%, 48	16.0%, 20	17.3%, 65	18.8%, 52	13.1%, 13	19.7%, 61	19.8%, 46	19.2%, 15	22.9%, 59	24.7%, 48	17.2%, 11
0.81 to 1.5	38.9%, 179	34.9%, 117	49.6%, 62	40.4%, 152	35.7%, 99	53.5%, 53	39.7%, 123	37.9%, 88	44.9%, 35	48.8%, 126	44.8%, 87	60.9%, 39
1.51 or higher	46.3%, 213	50.7%, 170	34.4%, 43	42.3%, 159	45.5%, 126	33.3%, 33	40.6%, 126	42.2%, 98	35.9%, 28	28.3%, 73	30.4%, 59	21.9%, 14
Return to country of origin since settling in Switzerland (% yes, N)	51.9%, 468	50.1%, 337	56.5%, 131	71%, 379	70.4%, 277	72.5%, 102	73.4%, 301	73.1%, 223	74.4%, 78	75.3%, 243	75.1%, 181	75.8%, 62
Multimorbidity (Median (Std-Dev)), N	1.6 (1.5), 458	1.7 (1.5), 337	1.2 (1.3), 129	1.9 (1.7), 370	2.0 (1.8), 269	1.5 (1.6), 101	1.7 (1.7), 311	1.9 (1.7), 231	1.2 (1.3), 80	1.7 (1.7), 252	1.9 (1.8), 188	1.0 (1.2), 64
PHQ (Median (Std-Dev)), N	5.4 (4.8), 466	5.8 (5.0), 336	4.5 (4.1), 130	5.5 (5.2), 377	5.9 (5.1), 276	4.5 (5.3), 101	6.2 (5.5), 311	6.4 (5.4), 231	5.7 (5.7), 80	6.3 (5.2), 260	6.5 (5.1), 194	5.6 (5.5), 66

Table A2 Random and fixed effects regression models on life satisfaction (complete sample)

	Total						
	Random effects GLS regression				Fixed effects GLS regression		
	1	2	3	4	2	3	4
	Coef.	Coef.	Coef.	Coef.	Coef.	Coef.	Coef.
Sex	0.52**	0.53**	1.69***	1.58***	(omitted)	(omitted)	(omitted)
Residence status - Application sent ^a		0.78***	1.76***	1.95**	0.58**	1.58***	1.36**
Residence status -Regularized ^a		0.89***	2.83***	1.94**	0.57**	2.56**	2.38**
Interaction resi- dence status x sex ^b			-0.55**	-0.41**		-0.56**	-0.53*
Age at baseline				0.01			(omitted)
Capacity to pay an unexpected bill (1500CHF)				0.51***			0.47***
Duration in Geneva at baseline				-0.01			(omitted)
Multi-morbidity (prevalence of several diseases)				-0.07			-0.07
Housing index (No. of persons/rooms)				-0.10			-0.11
Return to country of origin				0.13			0.13
Sending money				0.02			-0.01
Single (no partner)				-0.38**			-0.33*
PHQ score				-0.11***			-0.07***
Wave 3				-0.25**			-0.26**
Constant	6.60***	5.98***	4.91***	5.69***	7.09***	8.04***	8.84***
No. Of observations	1407	1407	1407	1,386	1407	1407	1,386
Individuals	464	464	464	457	464	464	457
r-squared ⁺	0.02	0.08	0.09	0.28	0.01	0.02	0.09

Notes: *** $p < 0.001$, ** $p < 0.01$, * $p < 0.05$. Dependent variable: Likert Scale 0–10, multi-morbidity additive scale of no. of chronic diseases, housing index: no. of persons in household/number of livable rooms, PHQ-9 score as additive scale, reference category for residence status a=undocumented, b=running from 1 to 6, + = r^2 between for RE, within for FE. All models are generalized least square regressions (GLS)

The Hausman test was significant for the combined sample in the second model with regularization and sex only (chi2 6.52, p-value 0.04) indicating a preference for the FE model, but not significant for model 3 (chi2 6.26, p-value 0.10). but also when including all variables (model 4, chi2 22.64, p-value 0.02), hence a FE model is used for the interpretation

Funding Open access funding provided by University of Geneva

Data Availability An anonymized version of the dataset is available under: Jackson, Y.-L. J., Burton-Jean-gros, C., Duvoisin, A., Refle, J.-E., Consoli, L., & Fakhoury, J. (2024). Parchemins study: impact of legal status change on undocumented migrants' health and well-being (Version 1.0.0) [Data set]. FORS data service. <https://doi.org/10.48573/fys6-br62>.

Declaration

Competing interests None.

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