

# Immigrant women in the Mediterranean Sea

## Identity-making and training routes

*Donne immigrate nel Mediterraneo  
Percorsi identitari e formativi*

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abstract

Today the multifaceted world of migrations seem to be more complex with reference to the female component, which has assumed different morphologies over decades. The current contribution highlights how female biographies, even when they are not bound to any story of privation and violence, bring the burden of stereotypes and biases related to a persisting cultural model, which continues to discriminate genders and cultures. Then, training is committed to combating them in different places and times.

**Key words:** culture, women, training

*Il multiforme universo delle migrazioni appare oggi ancor più complesso in riferimento alla componente femminile che, nel corso dei decenni, ha assunto differenti morfologie. Il presente contributo sottolinea come le biografie femminili, anche quando non sono legate a storie di privazione e di violenza, portano comunque con sé il carico di stereotipi e pregiudizi legati a un persistente modello culturale che continua a discriminare generi e culture. In tal senso, alla formazione – nella pluralità dei tempi e dei luoghi – spetta il compito di contribuire ad abatterli.*

**Parole chiave:** cultura, donne, formazione

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### 1. The multifaceted reality of female immigration

The society we live in seems to be marked by deep changes, which are questioning the classical theories of interpretation of way of being and of living in contemporary world. Some of the founding theories – like those of identity and otherness – can and shall be read by using lens other than the ones of some decades ago. Anyway, now more than ever identity will have to be based on a dynamic balance, and never definitively accomplished with otherness: an otherness which, before being outside, is within us, and obliges us to tackle with those identity-making changes determined by the globalization processes (economic, social and cultural) that no doubt become wider in case of subjects undergoing the experience of migration. When, and this happens in most cases, the migratory experience is suffered more than longed for, it often turns into an experience of alienation compared to an otherness – space more than relational – which is seen as opposing and contrasting compared to oneself and to one's own home culture.

However, the dynamic construction of identity not only affects he who suffers the migratory phenomenon, but he who lives the experience of reception as well: in fact, the construction of identity 'passes' through a dynamic interlocution with that richness of differences these persons are bearer of, learning how to build tangible occasions for dialogue and comparison. Moreover, it is not surprising that the prefix 'dia', which forms the word *dialogo*, means the capacity to 'pass through' thoughts, words, reasons and emotions to make them 'dialogue among them'.

Of the persons landing in our costs, women are more and more numerous. According to the latest Dossier on Immigration, submitted in October 2016, migrant women are 52,6%; then more than half of immigrants in Italy is of female gender. On the other hand, in the labor market, they are less represented and they are generally employed in less qualified works: in fact, half of women is busy with works of care and of familiar support. If such a professional placement in some way prevents them from

the crisis on employment (as they are engaged in sectors where the demand continues to be higher and higher), however it neither rewards their training (49,65% of women have an education higher than the job they perform; 22,1% among the Italian women) nor ensures them an adequate monthly salary (822 euro if compared to 1202 euro of an Italian woman). But immigrant women witness an always increasing vitality: if we think of firms controlled by immigrants, the number of those managed by women increases (between 2008 and 2015 men have increased by 49,6% while women by 66,4%). Along with a greater professional commitment, the immigrant women attend university at a wider extent: 58,7% of foreign university students and 60,8% of foreign graduates are women.

For instance, the wider stability (however underpaid and not properly qualified) of women's work makes them able to send more money than men to their home countries: let us think that they are in several cases the only 'breadwinner' within their families. Then they confirm to be a link with their families of origin and, at the same time, to possess the capacity and willingness to integrate in the receiving country. This is also due to either their personal experience of schooling (which, as already stated, is prevailing also at a university level) or to that of their sons, helping them integrating in groups of friends at school without, on the other hand, obliterating familiar affects and the culture of origin.

But a dark side of female migration exists; *in primis* it refers to a generalized increase (both male and female) of forced migrants, i.e. of those seeking asylum and refugees: the UNHCR (United Nations High Commission for Refugees) denounces that since 2015 the number of people who are compelled to leave their homeland due to unbearable situations of need, to a lack of freedom or because they escape from wars, has been considerably raised: for instance, 49% of 4.480.000,00 Syrian migrants is woman. Then there is a different female migration marked by heavy gender discrimination and violence that affects mainly women coming from the Southern Mediterranean Countries: the most striking case deals with the trade of migrant women, mainly Nigerian, with numbers which are really dramatic: 5.633 cases in 2015 and 1.642 during the first five months of 2016. A different form (but not less tragic) of sexual exploitation refers to female child brides, very often 'sold' by their families.

The variegated universe of migration becomes more complex if compared to that female component which has adopted over decades different morphologies both under the point of view of quantity and of quality: the number of immigrant women has so progressively advanced as to go beyond male immigration: each female biography records her own origin and belonging, and her motivations and aspirations which have deter-

mined the migratory choice. Anyway, these are stories of privations and of disorientation: of places, persons, experiences and relationships, knowledge and emotions, objects, colours, tastes and traditions.

Even when – but very few cases are recorded – the migratory choice is determined by the will to get a final title qualification, or by searching a better job without being ‘marked’ by particularly dramatic situations and events (as escaping from war or from complete poverty), it anyway implies breaking with one’s territorial belonging, more than ethnic and cultural. Colours, sounds, smells, tastes, voices, habits, space organization and time rhythm contribute to build our identity since childhood, and mark it deeply, turning into a traumatic event when we are compelled to deny everything in order to be accepted and received in other far countries.

In most cases, the women’s migratory choice is charged with biases and stereotypes, both cultural and gender, which sum those of their home country with those of the receiving country. Heavy offences against women of greater public visibility as the former Ministry Cecile Kyenge – invited to come back to the jungle – are known to everybody; on the other hand, stories of ordinary discrimination and stigmatization are consumed in the knowing silence of many. So immigrant women find themselves subjugated by ancient oppressions they have strived to escape from; these same forms end with being ‘recovered’ as a way of protecting them from new forms of cultural homologation which are felt as ‘imposed’ more than ‘proposed’ in the receiving country: the double sense of belonging obliges them to live such a condition in a way that is controversial, in a kind of split which provokes exhaustion, both physical and psychological.

Homologation condemns these migrant women to a flattening of one’s biography even when it is rich in experience and knowledge: in fact, many graduated women, who in their home countries play tasks of responsibility, are compelled to forgetting their expertise to ‘turn into’ carers and colfs, especially when their work helps ensure a respectable life to their family, to their sons left in their home country or brought with them in their migratory adventure. This is also one of the phenomena which is mostly spreading: the arrival of women with children without their partner or – a phenomenon which has an immediate mass media visibility – pregnant women or with babies. Personal and collective stories, gender and familiar stories, which let us understand that sense of loss, which often accompanies women landing in our costs.

This permanent state of temporariness ends with ‘removing’ something not only to them and their children, but also to those who host them in their homes, workplaces, spaces for public aggregation. We often forget that reception is a mutual opportunity because we can in turn learn from

one another, looking for common traits and using differences as forms of enrichment.

## **2. For a new culture of otherness**

To this respect, it is relevant to point out how such a productive plot between equality and difference is made possible among those peoples and cultures sharing same sea. In fact, the Mediterranean Sea has always represented a crossroads of points of views, of cultures, of experiences that have been finally hybridized. And from their differences Mediterranean peoples have been able to find roots and reasons of their similarity, dynamic and ever changing. The Mediterranean Sea one more time represents a quest for mediation and meeting, as its same name indicates (the sea, which 'mediates between the lands', which balances sea and land), and can stand, metaphorically speaking, as a form of meridian thinking (Cassano, 1996). In fact, meridian thinking acknowledges that what is new is learned from what is different, and not from what is identical; setting up a dialogue and opening to otherness does not mean losing one's identity, but recognizing it and confirming that it exists. Cassano writes (translation from 2010):

I believe that cultures are not blocks around an intangible and eternal essence, but some complicated sets [...]. The relationship with the other does not imply abandoning one's culture, but offers the possibility to interpret it again and reform it, keeping its basic elements [...]. Such interaction between cultures in the Mediterranean Sea has been recurring (pp. 3-4).

Then we should think of and realize a culture that is intercultural in itself, able to stimulate minds and animate consciousness, to trigger the doubt as a systematic process of questioning monolithic and self-sufficient points of view: this way only other ways of thinking will not be seen as a threat but as an opportunity. If we conduct an analysis on the root of the word culture, we discover its deeper meaning: culture means to grow. Also in the figurative sense, it means to care, to deal with attention, and at a wider extent, to nourish. As participle future, the word has an active meaning: it is what which has to be developed, cultivated and cared. Culture then is a not a mere erudition or something static to hand down in a way that is not critical: it refers to a circularity which goes from the past to the future through an action which refers to the ancient origin of the

Latin word *colere* (Angelini, 2011), i.e. ‘turning the land, tilling’, and then to nourish, to link the generated with what is to be born in a way that is dynamic and creative. A new culture of the human which finds its roots in a constitutive trait of the person, which Heidegger (1976) identified in the care. A category that belongs to all the human kind but that has always characterized women starting from the experience of maternity. The availability to listen and give advice, the capacity to ‘feel’ but also to act, the material and physical help as well as the emotional and cognitive support represent the forms through which women cultivate the relationship of maternal care since the first life years, extending to those intimate spaces of the dyadic relationship mother-son/daughter which leads to an understanding of the whole world.

The ‘common humanity’ (beyond ethnic, cultural and gender belongings) acknowledged and reinforced by dialogue can determine that intellectual, emotional and ethical tension which is capable of opposing logics and practices of intolerance and of self-centered authority, be them founded on either political, economic or ethnic and religious reasons. We should activate routes of individual and social growth which require long time for actualization and implementation, and which stand as permanent educational and training processes extending diachronically (lifelong), synchronically (life wide) and in depth (life deep), and which highlight the constitutive intercultural nature. This way training, meant as a process through which persons become capable of starting a path of emancipation, can turn into that point of convergence of theoretical approaches and tangible actions in order to re-think and revitalize the concept of democracy, “cultivating a participative training which could initiate and improve the capacity to see world through someone else’s eyes” (translation from Nussbaum, 2010, p. 112).

### **3. Training: ‘beyond’ the division between genders and cultures**

Training as a right for all and for the whole life is able to determine that trans-cultural belonging (Pinto, 2002), which, without letting people forget their roots, connects them to their common affiliation to the human gender:

We need to emphasize that diversity is a real wealth to the human gender also because it finds its origin in an identical matrix: white, black, yellow, American Indians all belong to the same humankind, share the same founding characteristics of the human gender, same

genetic identity beyond individual, cultural and social differences (translation from 2002, p. 123).

Training, education and schooling – since our first years of life – portray, according to Maria Montessori, the only and authentic ‘weapon for peace’; peace is the condition at the basis of good manners as well, as same Maria Montessori stated on the occasion of her numerous conferences for peace held between 1936 and 1937 and collected under her book titled *Education and Peace* (1970). Specific task of education is then ‘to construct peace’ in forms and places where training pathways are realized, in particular in families and at school. Education to caring and education to thinking become the main ways which, weaving between them, can erect thoughts and emotions ‘for’ peace and ‘of’ peace’.

Under this perspective, the role of women can make the difference as their broader presence in different contexts (family, school, work places, places for aggregation) can join immigrant women and native women, creating sympathetic networks of relationships which may succeed in taking advantage of the capacity of mediation that women have always had within their own family and their own ethnic group, but also ‘between’ families and different cultures, ‘between’ private and public spaces. As far as female migratory choice is determined by a need, it can turn into an occasion for growth and emancipation, and for transformation if compared to cultural models, which are often oppressive. However, such models do not only and always refer to home culture; they add to those of the receiving country: the diffused cases of women’s murder mass media every report of, also affect men of the so-called ‘Emancipated Western World’. Indeed, from the Map of Intolerance elaborated by Vox (Italian Observatory on Rights) for the second year, and which conducts an analysis on the most diffused tweets in social media, a high level of hatred against women emerges. Hatred gains ground in Northern Italy where, and this not a case, women’s murders have considerably increased in the last years (plus 8,3%) if compared to the South, where they record a sharp drop (minus 42,7%) (<http://www.voxdiritti.it/misoginia-la-rete-si-scatena-contro-le-donne/>).

Lucrecia Irigaray (2003) reported on the need for women to wear ‘a civil dress’ [...], a movable house around themselves in order to be protected and not offered to seduction and all forms of violence” (translation from p. 24). Then, such a right can become common to all immigrant and native women, sharing the same objective: that of being ensured their gender rights, beyond ethnic groups and cultures. Once again, equality and difference have to dialogue between them, combating those who turn differ-

ence into disparity and sexist violence. In order to accomplish it, we need to promote tangible actions of transformation through education diffused in formal, informal and not formal contexts: this way, acting at an educational level is acting at a level of transformation and emancipation with respect to norms, practices, values, habits that cancel differences or exploit them for discriminatory purposes.

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