

## Immigrant women, jobs, new professional skills

### *Donne immigrate, lavoro e nuove professionalità*

**Daniela Dato**

Ricercatrice di Pedagogia Generale e Sociale / Università degli Studi di Foggia

abstract

The present contribution shows three possible interpretations through which to read the concept of “new professional skills” about immigrant women: 1. To refer to the project of rebirth, re-planning and reconstruction of a personal and professional identity that immigrant women attach to work; 2. To ascribe a category of “novelty” to the jobs held by immigrant women, for the fact that, even though it is not about new jobs, they are particularly required because they are not performed by autochthonous women for many reasons; 3. To draw the attention to new professional skills to form, in order to face “women-immigration-job” emergency. It is an attempt that has not the expectation to draw a conclusion, but rather to present some possible, even unusual, perspectives of interpretation, reflection and research.

**Key words:** women, job, immigration

*Il presente contributo presenta tre possibili interpretazioni attraverso le quali leggere il concetto di “nuove professionalità” in relazione alle donne immigrate: 1. Fare riferimento al progetto di rinascita, riprogettazione e ricostruzione di una identità personale e professionale che le donne immigrate riconoscono al lavoro. 2. Riconoscere alle professioni svolte dalle donne immigrate una categoria di “novità” per il fatto che, paradossalmente pur non trattandosi di professioni nuove, esse sono particolarmente richieste perché non esercitate dalle donne autoctone per molteplici motivi. 3. Richiamare l'attenzione sulle nuove professionalità da formare per far fronte all'emergenza donne-immigrazione-lavoro. Si tratta di un tentativo che non ha pretese di giungere ad una conclusione ma presentare alcune possibili, anche inconsuete, prospettive di lettura, di riflessione e di ricerca.*

**Parole chiave:** donne, lavoro, immigrazione

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## 1. “The words seemed not so simple”

What can it mean to talk about new professional skills for immigrant women?

Beyond any simplistic and unambiguous explanation, in approaching the title of this article “the words seemed not so simple” (Woolf, 2006).

Because inside the words always live, often silently, “a number of complications behind a very simple phonetic shell” (Massini, 2016).

That’s why it is from title’s words that our reflection begins, not to suggest a conclusion but to present some possible, even unusual, perspectives of interpretation, reflexion and research.

Women, immigration, job, new professional skills: words to which we could ascribe the presumption to represent the *topos* of an age – ours – topics-problems that are characterising important passages in the development of our societies and that tell about the complexity of territories, peoples and nations.

To light up this reflexion like a lighthouse, the first word of the title: *women*.

A word that is symbol of an economic, social, and, even before, cultural transition that has pervaded systems of beliefs, habits, imaginaries, and even biological, bioethical and legislatives theories, which have driven our society to be characterised by processes of feminisation.

Despite the violence that today is still perpetrated against women all around the world, we may recognise a gradual transitional process from a patriarchal society to some not yet well defined models, which, albeit between contradictions and paradoxes, present clear elements of a progressive affirmation of principles and practices of feminisation.

It is about a phenomenon that is related not to the demographical number of women and men, but to the qualitative and positive dimension of a growing engaged participation of women in every aspect of the society (social, institutional, professional).

In 2006, this process of participation led the *Economist* to adopt for the first time the term “womenomics”, i.e. the *economy of women*, to affirm “how the future of our global economy resides more and more in women’s hands, seen as the most powerful engine of the global growth” (Vitali, 2009, p. 124).

This term, feminisation, seems to be strictly tied to the second term of our title: *immigration*.

This word, too, portrays our age. It is a phenomenon that is “compelling” singles and communities to rethink and redefine new identities, new familiar and social models.

And even in “the age of migration” (Castles, Miller, 1993) it is possible to sketch out the framework of the feminisation. The United Nations state that today women represent 48% of the global migrants. The *Statistical Dossier on Immigration 2015* points out that in Italy women are almost the half of immigrants and are among the settled migrants: they are 52,7% of the foreign residents, 50,1% of the EU Blue Card holders, 48,9% of all non-communitarian foreigners (either with short-term residence permit or with unlimited residence permit).

Profiles and stories of immigrant women are numerous and complex.

In some cases they are protagonists of migratory projects, in other cases they passively endure this choice, forced to redefine habits, lifestyle, familiar projects.

In all cases – and here our point of view is purely pedagogical – job may represent a means of *possibilisation*, reconstruction and redetermination of that future.

And that’s the reason why the word *job* is another important term of our article’s title. A “dark word”, a “blurred” word “faded into grey and black” (Massini, 2016), which over the last years has embodied the face of the global crisis and which today more than ever before represents the fly-wheel of development and integration or, rather, exclusion and marginalisation.

A mix of misery, hard work, creation and emancipation, dissatisfaction, exploitation, alienation, exclusion but also possibility, integration, participation, emancipation and active citizenship, it is an “everlasting truth” accompanying humanity.

And in particular for women, it has represented and still represents a possible means of “production of the self” (Gorz), that *room on one’s own* and those “five hundred pounds”, symbol of the first step towards a project of ransom and “awakening”. The beginning of a transformation, often painful, based on conflict, that Wolf, nearly prophetically, described as follows:

In a hundred years, I thought, reaching my own doorstep, women will have ceased to be the protected sex. Logically they will take part in all the activities and exertions that were once denied them. The nursemaid will heave coal. The shopwoman will drive an engine. All assumptions founded on the facts observed when women were the protected sex will have disappeared – as, for example (here a squad of soldiers marched down the street), that women and clergymen and gardeners live longer than other people. Remove that protection, expose them to the same exertions and activities, make them soldiers and sailors and engine-drivers and dock labourers, and will not women die off so much younger, so much quicker, than men that one will say, “I saw a woman to-day”, as one used to say, “I saw an aeroplane”. Anything may happen when womanhood has ceased to be a protected occupation (Woolf, 2006).

## 2. Reversing the perspective: job and (is) courage

And even for immigrant women womanhood has ceased to be a “protected occupation”, since they met pain and joy, hard work and courage, exclusion and integration.

In fact, in 2004 Ehrenreich and Hochschild, drawing the features of the feminisation of migratory flows, foresaw a “gender revolution on a global scale”.

A revolution within the revolution that reverses the traditional stereotype of the women “angels at the hearth” and settled in their homeland, towards a new, more active role of economic responsibility, even through a process that may lead them to become migrants, which already represents an event of extraordinary emancipation (Ehrenreich, Hochschild, 2004).

According to the above mentioned *Statistical Dossier on Immigration 2015*, in 2014 foreign employees were 2.294.000 among which 1.056.000 were women. Female incidence was 46% of the employees and 22,8% among the holders of individual companies; nearly half of foreign women (46,5%) were employed in domestic work or services to families.

Beyond a widespread stereotype, often supported by real facts, around the immigrant women victims of submission and invisibility due to the need of work and the type of work they are often forced to take up, we may pedagogically reconsider the role of job in the stories of migration (though dissatisfying and not socially attractive) as a bearer of a brave and resilient emancipation.

If, on the one hand, job is a means of segregation and exploitation, on

the other, it may be seen, mostly by women, as an agent of growth, not only for themselves but also for their kids and families, a generator of processes of integration in the host society (Maciotti, Pugliese, 2003), as well as a promoter of new dynamics of renegotiation of spousal roles and gender relations.

To avoid the risk to fall in the trap of a colonialist and ethnocentric approach, which may consolidate forms of subaltern citizenship and occupational segregation, educational and political commitment and pedagogical efforts can drive to the recognition of the capital of emotional and self-oriented competences that take shape in women through job research and its achievement.

Following the indications of the Opinion of the European Economic and Social Committee that, in 2015, invited to promote any activity and strategy in order to improve foreign women's image, the effort may be done in the direction of overturning immigrant women's stereotype as a victim of a triple oppression, but also as enemy, *other* and *different*, stranger and subject of suspicion, in order to acknowledge – in “the perspective of success”, courage, agency and resilience – their role of protagonist and social actress with specific functions, courageous and resilient, empowered, able to be adaptable and flexible and to run the risks, to assume personal and familiar responsibilities and to become even a model for the women of the host country.

According to “the perspective of success”, immigrant women are able to become capabilited because they have been put in the condition to choose the action, that is to exercise that “practical reason, belonging and control of their own environment”; in other words what we pedagogically identify as the possibility to exercise the right of an existential, social and political planning.

Job can thus be seen not only in its alienating dimension, but also – despite the social discrimination of which immigrant women are victims – as an opportunity of personal and relational empowerment.

It may become the engine of what Mapelli (2004) calls “virtue of the beginning”: courage, that capacity of “leaving one's private hiding place and showing who one is, in disclosing and exposing oneself” (Arendt, 2004), “a willingness to act and speak, to insert oneself into the world and begin a story of one's own”.

It is thus in the path of immigration and then of integration that it is possible to retrace this virtue of the beginning, which makes women able to “become subjects of their's own life”.

So, along their ways, loneliness, alienation, invisibility, but also courage, search for the self, as Ulivieri and Pace remind us when they un-

derline the features of a voyage that is not only physical but also identity-making, metaphor of changing, of rupture and transformation:

voyages, metaphorical or real, undertaken by women over the history have often been difficult, painful but at the same time necessary to get out from a condition of submission, passivity or oppression. Not only individual but also collective voyages that, mostly over the last decades, have seen women clustered around their willingness to have their rights and fundamental freedom recognised (2013).

It is also in the voyage towards a new job that woman finds out the force to become herself avoiding alienation, “a search for the self that unmasks the attempts of hiding” (Mapelli, 2004), a force that might help future immigrant women, thus building a network of solidarity and reciprocity functional to the integration.

### **3. Finding new professional competences: breadwinner between solitude and expectations**

This perspective guides us towards our interpretation of the concept of new professional competences related to immigrant women.

Starting from the considerations we have proposed hitherto, we think that there may be three different ways of approaching this concept: 1. To take account of the project of rebirth, replanning and reconstruction of a personal and professional identity that immigrant women attach to the job; 2. To recognise a category of “novelty” to the jobs taken up by immigrant women, for the fact that, though it is not about new jobs, these jobs are particularly required and are more likely to be carried on by immigrant women rather than by autochthonous women. 3. To draw the attention to the necessity to train new professionals in order to face the emergency women-immigration-job.

In the first case the term “new professional competence” refers to the personal and existential dimension of job, to that “new” seen as hope, possibility, project, transformation that women attach to the work as an occasion of “rebeginning”.

Whether it is about immigrant women for choice, family reunification or political asylum, the reference to the occasion of a new professional beginning (in this sense new professional competences) opens to a proactive reading, to agentivity and capability, which are intrinsic in job as well as the opportunity of integration and replanning it embodies, as reminded in

the *Resolution of the 10<sup>th</sup> of June 2016 on refugees: social inclusion and integration in the labour market*. As we may read in “A soul divided into two” (Unica Terra, 2007), lots of immigrant stories

turn around the labour market and facts connected to its research, to the relations with the employers, some of whom are good, some others stressful and exhausting, to the willingness to get any experiences, even free, in order to fulfil the need to be useful, able to react against closed doors, suspicions and prejudices (pp. 13-14).

Here, we would skip for a while the bad and disruptive side of the job, the one that implies the risk of invisibility, subjection, isolation, lack of juridical recognition, in order to reconsider, even in the difficulties, another side of the job: the good, utopian and capabiliting side each job may represent, mostly in disadvantaged and vulnerable situations.

We chose to pedagogically reaffirm the dignity of job, that may enable, even in its inconstancy, every immigrant woman to become “artist” and author of a personal as well as familiar project, which links the dimension of “private care” for oneself with the dimension of “public care”.

The painful achievement of a work is the first step towards the assumption of the role of “breadwinner”, economic and cultural force woman represents within the family, where she does not only act as an economic support but also as a builder of networks for the growth of her family of origin, and in particular of her children, as well as for the growth of herself. Indeed, the act of physically emigrating corresponds to a cognitive, social and cultural effort of the redetermination of a life’s project (Maioni 2010) and represents a “strategy of resistance, of transformation [...] and puts in place a project of life based on a greater autonomy” (Gilberto, Morisco, Morondo, 2006).

*Istat Report* reminds us that the general rate of breadwinner women has increased (the number of families where the woman is the only employed member has increased: 12,9% in 2014, 12,5% in 2013 and 9,6% in 2008), and this rate is even more accentuated among immigrant women (<http://www.ingenere.it/articoli/eredita-di-genere-della-crisi-rapporto-istat-2015>).

According to the *Statistical Dossier on Immigration 2016*, the demands for obtaining the Italian citizenship are higher for women than for men:

between 2014 and 2015 [...] despite the boom of acquisitions of the Italian citizenship, those acquired for spousal unions (which in the past were the greatest and were mostly required by women) have

decreased among women, from 25% to 16% (<http://www.in-genero.it/articoli/dati-smentiscono-stereotipi-dossier-statistico-immigrazione-2016>). At the same time they are more likely to follow a university path: 58,7% of the foreign students and 60,8% of the foreign graduates [...]. Finally, [...] women send to their country of origin more money than men, thus contributing to the economic support of their relatives and of their country of origin.

We like to think that, beyond stories of suffering, loneliness and separation immigrant women live, “new professional skills” may stand for “ransom” and rebirth. Paraphrasing Mariti, certainly the time of loneliness may become time of waiting (2003) “for an individual pathway towards the integration [and the emancipation], a more or less demanding, more or less painful, more or less durable path, [...] initial imprinting of a new existence” (Mariti, 2003, p.137).

As for the Moroccan women weavers (Mernissi, 2004), work becomes opportunity to rediscover one’s own self-esteem, to be concentrated upon a project, to achieve it with determination although the difficulties behind the corner.

It is about women who, following Mernissi, are concentrated on their project of “weaving”, they symbolically embody the myth of Penelope, “symbol of women’s determination to remain on a sovereign position and not to be submerged by the disasters that assail them [...]”. The image of [a] womanhood determined to face adverse forces, and not to be dominated by them” (Mernissi, 2004, p.150).

And pedagogically, in a long-term perspective, this means that it would not be important whether the first job in the host country is unqualified. As Tischner would say, it may represent the “axe of solidarity”, “dialogue at the service of life”, because “it is not the work that makes the worker, but it is the worker who makes the work, giving it sense. It’s him who decides how to work, with or without sense” (1981, p. 29).

Then it is thus possible to read an experience of exploitation and de-skilled job in a generative and long-term perspective, where work represents an important occasion to start again.

#### **4. The new professional skills of the parallel welfare: risk or resource?**

And in this way we may consider the possibility of a second interpretative perspective with which to look at new professional skills, certainly unusual but which needs to be considered.

In this second perspective, the word refers to the feature of novelty that specific jobs may acquire not because unusual but because they acquire an original role on the contemporary professional stage, because they are generally not well-accepted by occidental, and in particular Italian, women, and for this reason they offer great possibilities, though underpaid, of employment to the new immigrant *capital of identity*. There are numerous studies that put into evidence this dynamics of employment, which tells how some specific jobs are seen by autochthones as the last possibility, which on the contrary are carried out by those who seek hope and a new life. Furthermore, the idea to leave these (erroneously considered) less-skilled jobs to others would let autochthones accelerate their path of emancipation and social participation.

There will be, in this case, the possibility to read this circumstance through an attitude of *uncritical defensisme*, according to which the emancipation of occidental women justifies the cost of an insinuating new colonialism that turns around the same dynamics of reappropriation of right and visibility of the occidental femaleness at the expense of other femalenesses.

Nonetheless, it is also true that

immigrant women [...] have been included into the space of the lack of renegotiation of traditional female tasks, in the moment of territory's conquest of paid jobs by autochthon women; in the space of the lack of institutional response to the demographical decrease. The role of social substitute, the inclusion within social and gender contradictions (Frias, 2004, p.8).

Therefore, we may say that they are contributing to the construction of a parallel welfare on the ruins of the official one, often submerged and sometimes with an evasive ethical meaning, frequently paternalistic and equally often colonising the imageries and perspectives of growth and emancipation of the women migrants who materialise it.

Despite the awareness of the drifts hidden behind these dynamics, once again we should attempt a pedagogical, transformative and constructive-metabolic effort. An effort that makes us take into consideration the opportunity to read again this phenomenon in the light of a possible ransom of these women, who should be guaranteed the recognition of a professional identity, which becomes more and more difficult to find, because time and experience reinforce their specialisation towards Italian women. As for example the case of caregivers.

According to INPS (National Social Insurance Agency) Observatory

on domestic work, caregivers and domestic workers are today nearly 886.000, 672.194 of which are immigrants, even if it has to be pointed out that in this sector the number of Italian women has increased too, passing from 140.000 to 213.931 between 2002 and 2015.

And we know how “the growing average age of the population and the increasingly scarce resources available for public welfare, shows how the phenomenon of caregivers will become more and more crucial in the Italian social and familiar system, in important sectors such as children care and elderly care, care for individuals with disability or disease” (Mason, 2014, p.1).

It is true that data demonstrate how today immigrant women take up mostly de-skilled jobs or jobs in labour intensive sectors; it is also true that the *Dossier on Immigration 2016* denounces that the crisis

has increased the segregation in the low-qualified and less-paid jobs, jobs more exposed to contractual irregularities or to an under-employment: 49,6% of immigrant women are overeducated compared to the jobs they carry out (against 22,1% of the Italian women), 12,4% of them are underemployed (4,8% the Italian women), the average monthly salary amounts to 822 Euros (against 1.200 Euros for Italian women).

It is evident that it is about a vulnerable category, subjected to a triple discrimination, because the sexual and ethnical ones are followed by that of working condition, thus describing a hyperbole of exclusion, which starting from a *biological* base (sex) goes through the *cultural* one (ethnic group) to take the forms of *social* exclusion (work).

But even in this case there is a pedagogical possibility of rethinking their position and their fate.

Training and guidance are tools through which to assess and recognise the working identities of immigrant women, following at least three different and integrated types of actions aiming at promoting:

- A targeted vocational training addressed to the specific needs of the labour market;
- Training and updating courses that may lead to a project of professional development, starting from practical experience, but also that may become a support to the capitalization of knowledge in view of the choices to make in/for the future;
- Actions of formative and informative guidance, which may promote balances of competences and certification of them for immigrant women, to enter the labour market and acquire visibility.

What we have told hitherto finds its reason in what is declared in the Opinion of the EESC (2015) where it is underlined the importance to suggest formative policies in order to respond to the necessity to:

- Take account of immigrant women’s specific needs, in order to adopt adequate policies;
- Ensure that immigrant women are given necessary information;
- Improve for immigrant women their knowledge of the host country’s language, of its social organisation and its labour market;
- Recognise their qualifications, prevent disqualification, promote qualification;
- Create a range of opportunities for immigrant women, mostly for those who are less-qualified, creating opportunities to valorise and professionalise those sectors in which they work, thus contributing to their social recognition;
- Offer help and counseling to those immigrant women who are entrapped in such professional situations that forced them to remain invisible to fiscal system, to social insurance and healthcare, etc.;
- Spread formative pathways of entrepreneurial education also for immigrant women, organising them in collaboration with social parties and civil society;
- Improve the image of immigrant women, transmit a more positive concept also through strategies for supporting their personal self-placement, self-esteem and self-efficacy, together with the promotion of specific information campaigns.

## **5. New professional skills for female immigration: the specialist of guidance for the integration**

The above mentioned actions are the starting point to take into consideration the third and last perspective from which to look at the concept of “new professional skills”.

It looks at the problem from the point of view of the host country and of what this last can do for immigrant woman thanks to unprecedented professional skills, because of their multifaceted and “multitasking” features, which are useful to activate relations of help, by intercepting and giving voice to these women, this “capital of identity” and of competences, through the creation of opportunities, of environments and of relations that together know how to combine welcoming, recognition, training, work, according to a project of inclusion and longitudinal integration.

It is about professionals who, together with the normal competences of the cultural mediation (Fiorucci, 2000, 2011), are able to practice guiding competences of needs analysis, but also formative and job accompaniment, construction of a project for the personal and professional development (Deluigi, 2013).

At this proposal, explains Ulivieri, “it has [...] to be underlined that in the sector of cultural mediator it would be convenient to activate competences that combine gender identity with ethnic identity, thus developing different levels of awareness and self-esteem in immigrant women, through the methods of qualification of the self” (2003, p. 265).

So that the added value is the alchemy between competences connected to the pedagogy of gender diversity, to the intercultural pedagogy and to the pedagogy of guidance as “public property”, a means of inclusion and struggle against marginalisation, as it is underlined in the most recent recommendations of the European Union.

It seems therefore that the crisis “women-immigration-work-new professional skills” should proceed at the same rate as the training of “a vocational guidance specialist for the integration”, one of the professional figures of the future. A professional who, carrying out activities of welcoming, accompaniment, support and guidance to migrants, also through the mediation between immigrant people and territorial services for integration, is sensitive and aware of the specificities of gender, which characterise new migrations and is also able to activate guidance strategies for personal empowerment and capability.

It is about an action that combines theoretical competences with the capacity to use new operational-methodological tools of guidance and intercultural communication skills throughout the following phases:

- Welcoming;
- Analysis of personal needs;
- Accompaniment to formative paths;
- Accompaniment to work placement.

In this framework, an important role is played by the mapping and valorisation of personal and professional competences, which are supposed to overcome the idea of welcoming as a mere assistance, to turn into a capability approach. In the perspective of lifelong training, it is not only referred to the training of new professional skills, but also to provide specialists of intercultural mediation with new competences, we would define as “emerging competences”, among which:

- Competences of observation and needs analysis;
- Competences of welcoming, listening and first guidance;
- Methodological competences of formative guidance;
- Competences of accompaniment to work and of work placement;
- Competences of networking.

This kind of intervention is thus complex, wide and, in general, addressed to support and integrate all migrants in formative, cultural and labour local environment. This professional will become the connective tissue between persons, institutions and territory, aiming at promoting as much as possible the capacity for immigrant people to find the right responses to their existential needs, taking into account the specific differences and fragilities. The intervention of this professional is that of “caring thinking” (Lipman, 2005) both towards professional sphere and personal one, through the activation of strategies of coping and scaffolding.

As a note of closure. If on the one hand it is necessary to imagine professional figures able to put together gender aspects with cultural, ethnical and guiding ones, on the other it is necessary to remember that a democratic state and social system should firstly make this professional skills become a complement of a wider basic training aiming at “cultivating humanity”, welcoming the unlimited otherness apart from belonging and gender, in the respect of the Person.

Because “wherever the Person is sovereign, even deserts bloom” (Mernissi, 2004, p.175).

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