

## Cape Verdean immigrant women in Italy

### *Donne capoverdiane immigrate in Italia*

**Clara Silva**

Associata di Pedagogia Generale e Sociale / Università degli Studi di Firenze

abstract

Cape Verdean women's immigration in Italy is a unique reality made the subject of very few studies so far. This paper presents the first results of some research conducted by administering fifty in-depth interviews. In particular, it highlights the differences between the first and second generations of immigrants regarding their social and professional mobility, also focusing on the close intergenerational relationships between these women. It thus appears that, in addition to improving their standard of living, one of the main objectives of these women is to raise a family in Italy or to be reunited with their children left at home. Of particular interest is the ability to manage this delicate moment of family reunification by both mothers and daughters, who, thanks to their efforts in studying, find better employment compared to their mothers.

**Keywords:** women, Cape Verde, immigrants

*L'immigrazione femminile capoverdiana in Italia è una realtà peculiare fatta oggetto finora di rari studi. Il saggio presenta i primi risultati di una ricerca condotta attraverso la somministrazione di una cinquantina di interviste in profondità. In particolare sono messe in luce le differenze tra le prime e le seconde generazioni di immigrate quanto alla loro mobilità lavorativa e sociale, soffermandosi inoltre sulle relazioni intergenerazionali strette da tali donne. Risulta così che, oltre al miglioramento della propria condizione di vita, uno dei principali obiettivi delle donne è quello di formarsi una famiglia in Italia o farsi ricongiungere dai figli lasciati in patria. Di particolare interesse è la capacità di gestire il delicato momento del ricongiungimento familiare sia da parte delle madri che delle figlie, le quali, grazie all'impegno nello studio, riescono a trovare un'occupazione migliore rispetto a quella delle madri.*

**Parole chiave:** donne, Capo Verde, immigrate

# Cape Verdean immigrant women in Italy

---

## **1. Immigration, an intrinsic phenomenon of the history of Cape Verde**

The migration phenomenon is intrinsic to the history of the Cape Verdean people, the result of the meeting of groups of different origin, since the Cape Verde islands remained uninhabited until Europeans arrived in the mid-fourteenth century. Located in the Atlantic Ocean about 500 km from the Senegalese coast, the archipelago consists of ten islands (Santo Antão, São Vicente, Santa Luzia, São Nicolau, Sal, Boavista, Maio, Santiago, Fogo and Brava). They were discovered by the Portuguese and the Italian navigators who were in the pay of the Portuguese crown, which promoted the settlements in these islands as strategic places within the triangular trade of slaves and raw materials between Europe, Africa and the Americas. Thus, a mixed-race society was formed very quickly produced by the meeting of a group of white men from various European countries, mainly Portugal, and women brought as slaves from Africa, especially from Guinea (Batalha, Carling, 2008, p. 14).

For a long time, however, Cape Verde could not provide favourable living conditions for its inhabitants. This was for several reasons: the first due to slavery, which had long marked the society and economy of the country, forcing many to look for freedom elsewhere; the second resides in the tenacity of the Portuguese colonialism, which for centuries exploited the resources and the inhabitants of the islands, without worrying about creating infrastructure and sources of income for the population; the third is represented by recurring droughts, which made the land unproductive and which in the middle of the twentieth century created hunger and extreme poverty decimating the population; lastly, the isolation imposed by the long dictatorship of Salazar, who, until his collapse in 1974, prevented the attention of international organisations being given to the country, blocking development and the democratisation processes. For all these reasons emigration presented itself to the Cape Verdeans as

destiny and still presents itself, albeit with less urgency, after more than forty years since its independence.

According to historians, the Cape Verdean emigration in the world began in the late eighteenth century and was directed towards North America, when some Cape Verdeans embarked as whalers on ships of US companies engaged in fishing in the seas of the Azores and Cape Verde.

Between the end of the eighteenth and early nineteenth century one met Cape Verdeans in the United States employed in various types of activities: the gold rush in California; as crew members on the sailing ships of the coastal police or as boatmen in Fall River; as stokers on Pacific trains; as farmers in their own right, specifically in the cultivation of strawberries and in agricultural work on behalf of others in the swampy areas of Cape Cod and in the cotton fields; as workers in the textile industry in New Bedford (Carreira, 1983, p. 82).

Emigration extended in the meantime to the entire American continent, especially to Brazil, Argentina, Chile and Uruguay. In parallel, around 1860, the forced emigration began in São Tomé and Príncipe, imposed by the Portuguese rulers to employ Cape Verdean labour on the coffee plantations which was just introduced in that colonial domain (Batalha, Carling, 2008, p. 21). In those same years, the Cape Verdeans emigrated even to other African countries (Guinea Bissau, Senegal, Gambia, Angola and Mozambique) because of famine.

At the end of World War II a massive intercontinental migration started, called the “great exodus” (Carreira, 1983, p. 107), which continued until Cape Verde gained its independence, in 1975. In that period the destination favoured by Cape Verdeans was Europe, first the Netherlands and then Portugal, France, Luxembourg, and finally Italy and Switzerland. To encourage emigration to these destinations, was the demand for labour to be used, on the one hand, in post-war reconstruction, for those countries devastated by the Second World War, such as Germany and France, and on the other industrial development in some areas without national personnel, as in the Netherlands or Portugal. As for Italy, as of the end of the fifties, a strong demand for workers in the domestic sector following the employment of Italian women in industries and services, instead favoured female emigration.

## 2. Female immigration to Italy

With the economic boom of the postwar period, a process of emancipation began for Italian women favoured by ever higher levels of education and at the same time increasing opportunities for women's employment in industries. In this context, there was no local workforce in the field of domestic work and space opened for foreigners. Thus the female immigration started, among who the Cape Verdean women were the first protagonists (Demetrio, Favaro, Melotti, Ziglio, 1990; Vicarelli, 1994; de Filippo, 2000). The female component, which now makes up more than half of the five million legal immigrants in Italy, still represents a significant slice of Cape Verdean immigration (IDOS Study and Research Centre, 2016).

In the specific case of the Cape Verdean immigration, the phenomenon originated in 1959 assuming, for a long time, an exclusively feminine character, and was favoured by the demand for domestic workers to be employed in the homes of middle-class families in the main Italian cities (Jesus, 1989). Maria Francisca, called Marichica, native of the island of Santo Antão was the first woman to lead the way of Cape Verdean immigration to Italy. Her testimony clarifies the genesis of a phenomenon destined to leave an indelible mark both on the Cape Verdean society and on the Italian one:

I was fourteen then. In Sal I worked as a chamber maid in the Hotel Atlantic, the only one at that time on the island which was frequented by Alitalia pilots, who used the airport of Sal as a refueling stop on their journey to Argentina or Brazil. It was on one of those occasions that the captain A. M. asked me if I would like to go and work in his home in Rome, with his wife and daughter. I immediately accepted the proposal (Gallone, Jesus, 2012).

After some time, Marichica found jobs for other girls from her country, always with middle-class Roman families, creating a true migratory chain that would last until the end of the eighties. In the meanwhile young women also began to leave the island of São Nicolau, but in this case, acting as a bridge with Italian families, were the Capuchin missionaries on the island:

It was me – says Father Gesualdo – who sent the first girls to work in Italy, the phenomenon which then set off the migration chain, thereby helping many families and especially the island. The first one I got to go was Adriana [...]. It was in 1963. Then also Lalache, Elisabeta, Maria de Monte, Ilda, Silvia, Lidia and Lucialina all left.

All of them were part of the choir in the church and were all literate. I selected them because they were the best I knew and I also wanted to make a good impression. They were all from Vila da Ribeira Brava. After a while we decided not to continue, because our father superiors did not take kindly to this operation, and so we gave up. But the migratory chain had already been activated (Gallone, Jesus, 2012).

In fact, the chain was continued by the women themselves, who, once in Italy, were joined by sisters, nephews and nieces, cousins and friends, creating a community among the most significant during those years. At first the goal was Rome; later also other cities like Palermo, Naples, Florence or Milan became places of welcome and job placement. The emigration of Cape Verdean women to Italy reached its peak between the late seventies and early eighties, progressively involving all the islands of the archipelago (Jesus, 1989).

Despite the numerical importance and the specificity of the female presence in Italian migration, marked as a whole by a wide variety of migratory paths, scholars have dedicated little attention to it and when that happened it was very often at the initiative of the same immigrants who wanted to tell their story and that of their communities. In the case of Cape Verdean women, the following volumes deserve to be mentioned: *Capo Verde. Una storia lunga dieci isole* (Cape Verde A history ten islands long) by the *Organização das Mulheres em Caboverdeanas* in Italy (1989) and *Racordai. Vengo da un'isola di Capo Verde. Sou de uma ilha de Cabo Verde* (I come from an island of Cape Verde) by Maria de Lourdes Jesus (1996) to which the documentary film *Marichica foi a primeira* (2012) made by Annamaria Gallone and created by the same Jesus is the most recently added.

The reality of Cape Verdean female immigration to Italy still remains an issue to be explored even from an intercultural perspective, in order to understand the social integration processes of the first immigrant women better and the conditions of the second 'Italian-Cape Verdean' generation, in order to develop education-oriented strategies of inclusion. In this perspective research was promoted by the Department of Educational Sciences and Psychology, University of Florence, which is still in progress, of which some early results are presented here. Its aim is in fact to contribute to a thorough understanding of the level of social inclusion of Cape Verdean women in Italy, paying attention also to the second generation, through the collection and analysis of fifty women and their children's life stories. The research was conducted in the Italian cities where there are

significant numbers of Cape Verdeans (Rome, Naples, Palermo, Milan, Florence, Genoa and Bologna) between October 2016 and January 2017.

### **3. Social-work insertion and realisation of one's own life project**

If one looks at the first generation, the specificity of domestic work and the lack of social mobility create major obstacles in the implementation of their life plans, or in relation to the desire to be reunited with their children – and sometimes even by their husbands – left in Cape Verde or that of starting a family in the country of immigration. Anyone who had immigrated to find a job as a live-in domestic worker, only rarely was able to change her occupation, if anything, merely to work by the hour.

I've been working for the same family for twenty-eight years. They have gradually increased my salary and I'm happy with my lot (A. from São Vicente, Naples).

I've changed so many houses [in the space of eight years]. [...] In 1990 I started to work by the hour. But it did not last long because I had a son. He was two years old and I took him to Cape Verde against my will and I came back to work in a live-in position. [...] In 1994 I had to bring my husband over and I rented a flat and I started working by the hour (I. from São Vicente, Naples).

About a third of women who emigrated to work in families nonetheless painstakingly managed to take up external professional careers other than the care work sector. Typically, after a long period of work as home helpers, mostly thanks to the study and the obtaining of professional qualifications, have been able to find employment as self-employed workers or employees in the private sector and sometimes in the public administration (after obtaining Italian citizenship).

It was 1967 (when I arrived in Italy). [...] I worked in two families both of Palermo socialites. [...] The second family helped me to take a course of home care at Villa Sofia. [...] In 1983, I got my diploma, rented a house and started working for the Palermo Municipality as a home help. It was possible because I already had Italian citizenship. [...] Today, at my age, we live [she also refers to her husband] on our pension (L. from São Nicolau, Palermo).

I was fourteen in 1967. [...] I was in that family (to work) until I got married. [...] I left work and dropped out of the Portuguese school to start a family. [...] I started studying again as we had agreed. [...] I finished the exam to be a nurse with 70 (maximum score) and honours. I did two competitions: one at *Isola Tiberina* [Hospital] and another at *San Camillo* [Hospital]. I won both competitions and chose to go to *San Camillo*, where I still work (I. from São Vicente, Rome).

Much more varied is the employment situation of the daughters who arrived before the age of adulthood to be reunited with their mothers who had previously emigrated to Italy. The situation is as it were diametrically specular to that of the first-generation women, since only a minority of the daughters worked as live-in domestic workers or by the hour. Almost all, albeit through not always linear and sometimes tiring paths, have found employment either as employees or as freelancers, mainly in the service and trade sectors.

Having just arrived my mother taught me the work she did [...]. So I too worked in the home help area. But they did not pay me. I stayed at home when it was the day that my mother had to go out [her free days as per the contract]. [...] In 1988 we had to leave because our employer died. [...] I was nineteen years old and I went to look for work by the hour. So I worked in the morning and I studied in the afternoon and went to the Portuguese school. [...] I finished high school and I enrolled at university. [...] I couldn't sign up for medicine because attendance was compulsory and I had to work to pay for my studies. So I chose economy, even though it was not my passion. Then I began to like it. [...] Since 2008, I've been working in the accounts at the *Casa Tra-Noi* (House Between-Us) with a permanent contract (T. from São Nicolau, Rome).

In 1980, at the age of fourteen, my mother got me to come to Italy, to Rome. [...] At nineteen I concluded commercial secretarial school and I found my first job in a law firm. [...] I stayed at that law firm for five years [...] until they called me to work at Anzio as a receptionist in a large company, where I was promoted: from receptionist to head of personnel. [...] With my new partner, who I met in the workplace, we set up on our own and we developed our agency, for twelve years, until his sudden death a few months ago. Now with my son we are trying to set up our own company. It is all ready, including our old customers (Z. from Sal, Rome).

A constant experience of these women's lives is their dedication to studying, in which their mothers firmly invested, obtaining brilliant results overall that allowed them to enter the labour market with a high school diploma or a university degree.

#### **4. Intergenerational dynamics between mothers and daughters**

In Cape Verdean culture a woman acquires full family and social recognition through motherhood. In other words, not having children is a failure for their own personal fulfilment. It also should be considered that the rearing and education of children traditionally rest specifically on women, since the father figure is often absent, and because many men had to leave the country, also as a result of the long-term consequences of the slave society, in which women were entirely assigned the responsibility for taking care of children (Monteiro, 1997). Only recently, due to the processes of democratisation and globalisation, that have marked the last decades in the history of Cape Verde, these socio-cultural traits have been partially attenuated, with a reduction in the number of children per woman, and with a tendency to form firmer parenting couples, with children recognised by the father and unions formalised in civil and/or religious rites.

Considering that the first immigrants were brought up in a colonial context with few opportunities for education and the lack of information on the health and social issues related to procreation, in many cases, even though young at the time of emigration, were already mothers of one or more children (Andall, 2008, p. 87). Hence the decision to leave, entrusting the children to the care of her mother, that is the children's grandmother.

At sixteen I became a mother. At that time one remained pregnant without knowing how or why. Parents repressed, but they did not know how to explain how you became pregnant and especially how you could protect yourself. [...] In 1980, at the age of 18 [...] I came here, leaving my son of a year and a half with my parents. [...] Like everyone else I suffered a lot from homesickness, especially for having left my son. I had a terrible feeling of guilt that made me cry a lot (D. from Sal, Palermo).

My mother left for the Netherlands in 1977, when I was pregnant. I was nineteen. [...]. Then I had another daughter, I left them both with their grandmother. When I came here, I left a five-year-old and a three-year-old (F. from São Vicente, Naples).



For immigrant women, one of the primary objectives to be achieved is to be reunited with their children left behind in Cape Verde: a distance which is a source of great suffering for them. A goal that they often fail to reach or reach only partially when it comes to more than one child. In some cases, they are confronted with the painful choice not to keep the children with them as long as they continue to work as live-in domestic helpers:

At twenty-two I already had three children. [...] The first I had when I was sixteen. One stayed with my aunt, another with a lady where I worked some hours, another stayed with another lady. My mother had already died [...]. I brought my other daughter over from Cape Verde because my sister has insisted so much that she should come. [...] My employer did not want her and I had to put her in a boarding school (T. from São Vicente, Naples).

The same experience, as seen through the eyes of the daughters, shows how the difficulties of adaptation and reconstruction of the relationship with the mother, adding the shock of having to go and live in a boarding school because the mother could not find another housing solution for them.

Before going to Italy my mother left three children. I am the youngest and I was only seven months old. [...] I came to Italy when I was eleven. [...] I could not respond to her from the emotional point of view because my [real] mother was my grandmother. [...] Her employer helped my mother to find the boarding school where I went to stay [...]. Before I came I did not know that I would go to boarding school, and even if they had told me I had no idea what it was. [...] I was in a boarding school until the age of nineteen (M. from São Nicolau, Rome).

The experience of motherhood for those women who have come back to be reunited with their mothers seems different from that of the first generations of immigrant women, since they arrive at a young age and without children left behind in Cape Verde. The number of children who are born in Italy is more limited and there is a strong investment in their education.

## Conclusions

The image of Cape Verdean immigrant women in Italy, common in the international migration context, is often that of women who are resigned to remaining closed within the walls of the houses where they work as domestic workers without being able to realise their own life projects. The results of our research show, however, a more complex and multi-faceted reality. If it is true that for the first generation of women work and social mobility were limited, for those who arrived as part of a reunion, the career paths are much more dynamic. Seen from the perspective of intercultural education, the stories of the women who came to be reunited with their mothers offer a very interesting insight in the mother-daughter relations, in particular, as regards intergenerational gender solidarity, generator of a chain of care and education that sometimes extends up to four generations. Both mothers and daughters prove to be very resilient, particularly as regards the ability to overcome relationship difficulties imposed by the reciprocal distance. Indeed, the daughters who came for family reunification were brought up mostly by their maternal grandmothers, to whom their mother had entrusted them at the time of emigration. At the time of reunification, these women experienced a double affective laceration, on the one hand with the figure who had brought them up, and on the other with the mother, with whom, for the first time had to build or rebuild a bond.

## Bibliography

- Altieri G. (1992). I capoverdiani. In G. Mottura (Ed.), *L'arcipelago immigrazione. Caratteristiche e modelli migratori dei lavoratori stranieri in Italia* (pp. 185-201). Roma: Ediesse.
- Andall J. (2008). Cape Verdeans in Italy. In L. Batalha, J. Carling (Eds.), *Transnational Archipelago. Perspectives on Cape Verdean Migration and Diaspora* (pp. 81-90). Amsterdam: Amsterdam University Press.
- Batalha L., Carling J. (Eds.) (2008). *Transnational Archipelago. Perspectives on Cape Verdean Migration and Diaspora*. Amsterdam: Amsterdam University Press.
- Bossu-Picat Ch. (1985). *Cabo Verde: dez anos de desenvolvimento*. Paris: Editions Delroisse.
- Cabral J.J. (2012). *Padre Gesualdo Fiorini da Fiuggi OFMCap: un italiano di São Nicolau* (trad. it. di L. Sgrò e S.J. Protz, a cura di R. Cordovani, Provincia Romana dei Frati Minori Cappuccini, Roma).
- Carreira A. (1983). *Migrações nas ilhas de Cabo Verde*. 2a edição. Praia: Instituto Caboverdeano do Livro.

- Centro Studi e Ricerche IDOS (2016). *Dossier Statistico Immigrazione 2016*. Roma: IDOS.
- de Filippo E. (2000). La componente femminile dell'immigrazione. In E. Pugliese (Ed.), *Rapporto immigrazione. Lavoro, sindacato, società* (pp. 47-63). Roma: Ediesse.
- Demetrio D., Favaro G., Melotti U., Ziglio L. (Eds.) (1990). *Lontano da dove. La nuova immigrazione e le sue culture*. Milano: FrancoAngeli.
- Gallone A., Jesus M. de L. (2012). *Marichica foi a primeira. Mulheres migrantes de Cabo Verde*. Kenzi Productions.
- Jesus M. de L. (1989). La nostra emigrazione in Italia. In Organização das Mulheres Caboverdeanas em Itália (Ed.), *Capo Verde. Una storia lunga dieci isole* (pp. 85-88). Roma: D'Anselmi.
- Jesus M. de L. (1996). *Racordai. Vengo da un'isola di Capo Verde. Sou de uma ilha de Cabo Verde*. Testo portoghese a fronte. Roma: Sinnos.
- Lopes Filho J. (1995). Evolução do papel da mulher na sociedade cabo-verdiana. *Islenha*, 17: 55-63.
- Monteiro C.A. (1997). *Comunidade imigrada. Visão sociológica. O caso da Itália*. S. Vicente: Gráfica do Mindelo.
- Organização das Mulheres Caboverdeanas em Itália (Ed.) (1989). *Capo Verde. Una storia lunga dieci isole*. Roma: D'Anselmi.
- Silva C. (1998). Migrazioni a Capo Verde. I capoverdiani nel mondo e in particolare in alcuni paesi europei (Portogallo e Italia). *Confronto*, 8: 121-132.
- Silva C. (2012). Migrant Jobs and Human Cultures: Transformation through a New Formation. In V. Boffo (Ed.), *A Glance at Work. Educational Perspectives* (pp. 59-76). Florence: Florence University Press.
- Silva C. (2015). Immigrants from Cabo Verde in Italy: history and paths of socio-educative integration. *Journal of Cape Verdean Studies*, 2: 25-35.
- Vicarelli G. (Ed.) (1994). *Le mani invisibili. La vita e il lavoro delle donne immigrate*. Roma: Ediesse.

o  
P  
i