

Female immigration: issues, new trends and cultural enrichment

Migration has always been a substantial part of world history ever since the origin of mankind. The most recent years have seen a surge in the number of migrants coming to Europe, as a consequence of global unrest and bloody civil wars, such as the one in Syria. The issues tied with this soaring flow of people, either looking for a fresh start or fleeing from persecution have, quite obviously, started a vivacious debate. In fact, it is hard not to notice how, in the last couple of years, migration has become a key point in the political discussion.

Even though the process of migration is different for men and women, one crucial factor which is not usually taken into account when discussing about it is gender. In fact, if this element is not taken into account, understanding the conditions which might lead women to migrate, the predominance of women in certain job positions or their issues, becomes incredibly difficult. Therefore, in order to understand the phenomenon better, it is important to highlight the peculiarities of female migration as it is actually different from the male counterpart.

According to the United Nations Department of Economic and Social Affairs (UNDESA) the number of international migrants has reached 244 millions in 2015 ¹, approximately 49 % of whom are women². As for 2015, about 5 million foreigners live in Italy, 52,7% of whom are women. ³ When considering the data concerning the number of naturalisations, the 58,8% of new Italian citizens are women between 25 and 39 years of age, while in younger generations there is more *equilibrium*. However, the gender balance shown by the aforementioned datas is only statistical: in fact, substantial differences arise when considering the different ethnicities of migrants. For instance, when it comes to African migrants there is an high male predominance while when analysing flows coming from Eastern Europe or the Philippines there is a considerable female dominance. Apart from geographical differences, migrants are culturally-diverse too. One of the most crucial differences between them concern their religion: nearly all Moldavians are Orthodox while the majority of Afghans are Muslim. It is therefore incredibly important not to generalise when analysing migrations as it may lead to mistakes and misunderstandings.

The cultural and geographical origins of female migrants are some of the key elements which influence the whole migration and integration process. On a general level, there are three main reasons which may lead a woman to choose to migrate to Italy and, more generally, to Europe.⁴ Chinese and Filipinos normally decide to migrate for economic reasons. In particular, the latter tend to act like “pioneers”, as they usually move on their own, without other members of their family.

¹ United Nations, Department of Economic and Social Affairs, Population Division (2016). *International Migration Report 2015: Highlights*

² Ibid.

³ ISTAT, *Bilancio Demografico Nazionale*, 2016

⁴ C. Malfone, *Immigrazione al femminile. Modelli femminili, valori, identità*. (2006). <https://rpd.unibo.it/article/viewFile/1468/846>

Later on, when they have a job and a solid financial situation, other members of the family will usually join them. On the other hand, the migration of Eritrean, Nigerian and Gambian women is particularly frequent when it comes to fleeing from persecutions, unrest, an abusive family or uncertain political situations. Finally, family reunification is the reason behind the migration of Egyptian and Moroccan women. In fact, female migrants coming from these countries are less likely to migrate on their own as their husband, who is the head of the family, is usually the first to move abroad, in order to find a better job or to improve his family's life.

Refugees and illegal immigrants are particularly vulnerable as they can be subject to sexual violence and exploitation. A recent example of this is given by a network of prostitution which was unveiled in Vicenza. A criminal group was forcing several 17-years old undocumented Nigerian girls to sell their body in order to pay back their "immigration fees".⁵ Unfortunately, the number of migrants who are subject to trafficking is growing steadily. A survey conducted by the United Nations found that 70% of migrants arriving in Europe illegally has been exploited or a victim of human-trafficking.⁶

Although migrating might be the only possible choice in order to guarantee one's personal safety, the process of moving and integrating in a foreign country is never entirely free from traumas and risks. In fact, not only do female migrants settle in a country which is not theirs, but the gender stereotypes of their home countries usually clash with the Western way of life.

For example, here are the experiences of two Bengalese young women of twenty, who have recently moved to England:

"In my experience, boys integrate more easily. Bengalese girls usually wear traditional clothes so I think it's harder for them." (Shimonti)

"For men it's a less drastic experience because they can wear whatever they like, they don't have to cover their hair, they can go out at whatever hour they want. For women it's definitely harder." (Shada)

Even Nobel Price laureate Malala Yousafzai, who was forced to flee from Pakistan because she was shot by the Taliban for standing up for girl's education, experienced a cultural shock when moving to England. Talking about her new town, Birmingham, she says⁷:

"In the square was [...] a Costa coffee bar with glass walls through which you could see men and women chatting and mixing in a way that would be unthinkable in Swat."

⁵ Il Giornale di Vicenza, 3 March 2017

⁶ <https://www.theguardian.com/global-development/2016/oct/18/70-of-migrants-to-europe-from-north-africa-trafficked-or-exploited-un-united-nations-survey>

⁷ M. Yousafzai, *I am Malala*, Weidenfeld, London (2013)

Later on she adds:

“At nights our eyes were all out on stalks at the skimpy clothes that women wore. [...] My mother was so horrified that she cried ‘I’m drowning!’ and begged my father ‘Please, take me to Dubai. I can’t live here!’”

As this two passages show, settling in a community which has radically different values from their home-country might cause a cultural backlash, whose psychological insights are currently being analysed by researchers.⁸ The power of the clash is perfectly understandable when thinking about a woman who has lived all her life following a determinate set of values and prescriptions, whom she suddenly finds destroyed when moving to a country which is not hers.

As it conditions their approach toward the migration process, the social and economic context of her country of origin similarly influences a woman’s access to the job market in the new country too. In 2014, in Italy, 49,3 % of female migrants held a job position while, on the other hand, 46,2 % of Italian women were employed.⁹ This apparently misleading figure can be explained with the fact that migrant women are more likely to be *working poors*¹⁰ and to hold a low-level job than Italian women, as the majority of them works as domestic workers. However, it is to be noted that a great number of them are undocumented and consequently vulnerable to exploitation and violence, without any legal or social right. Another issue tied with this kind of job positions is the common equation of migrant women with low-level jobs. As a consequence of this, there is an actual risk of a sectoral and occupational segregation by ethnicity or country of origin.¹¹ For instance, in Italy the words “*Filipino*” and “*Ukrainian*” have become synonyms of “*in-house worker*”. Another important issue encountered by female migrants is gender inequality in the receiving country. Not only are they treated less favourably because they are foreigners, but they are discriminated as women too, as in nearly every Western country a gender pay gap exists. This means that an immigrant woman will normally hold an ethnic-based job *and* she will be paid less than her male migrant counterpart.

Despite the enormous issues tied with the positions held by female migrants, it is undeniable that the financial independence gained through their job - as humble as it may be - is a trigger for their emancipation and self-realisation. Thus, the newly gained independence necessarily results in a change in gender relations in the family sphere. Furthermore, the country of destination benefits from their skills while their country of origin from their remittances which may be used to improve the living condition of relatives. In fact, women have a different attitude than men when it comes to remittances: they keep their expenses under tight control and invest in the well being of the family.

⁸ Kirmayer, Laurence J. et al. “*Common Mental Health Problems in Immigrants and Refugees: General Approach in Primary Care.*” in CMAJ : Canadian Medical Association Journal (2011)

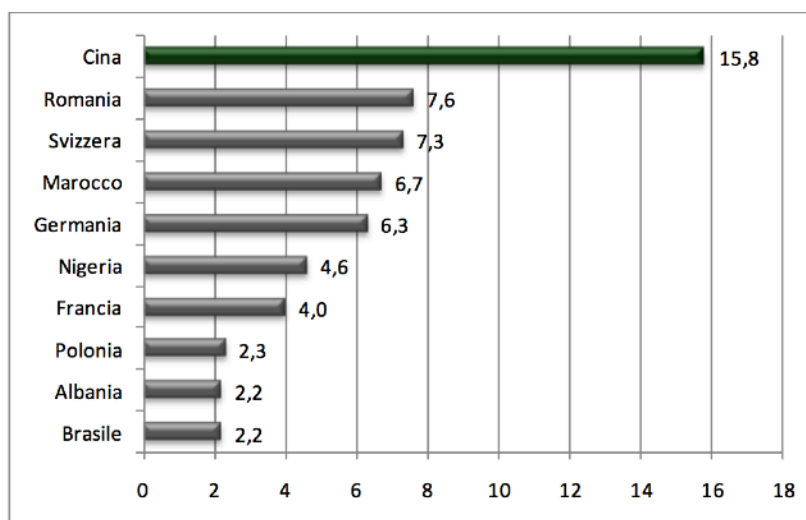
⁹ Progetto La FemMe, *L’occupazione femminile in tempo di crisi* (2014)

¹⁰ Caritas e Migrantes, *XXV Rapporto Immigrazione* (2015)

¹¹ Centro Studi e Ricerche IDOS, *Dossier Statistico Immigrazione* (2014)

Consequently, women are arguably more focused on the well-being of their loved-ones than in their own careers.¹² Moreover, in many countries, they also are part of organisations which campaign for gender equality. Another practical effect of female migration concerns integration in the country of destination. Researchers have effectively outlined the positive impact of immigrant women both on their families and society as they can effectively link the public sphere with their own family unit. As a matter of fact, even when their occupations concern just taking care of their children, female immigrants have to take at least a semi-active role in the relationship with public institutions such as school. This normally allows them to link and integrate their families better and to generate social capital.¹³ This positive asset has an all-encompassing set of consequences which, in the end, impacts the whole society. Moreover, in recent years a break in the trend of women's exploitation has emerged. In fact, in Italy the number of foreign female entrepreneurs has rose significantly, as a consequence of immigrant women becoming a more active part of the labour market, especially in the Northern regions. As recently as in early March 2017, Emma Bonino, a member of the Italian Radical Party, underlined the importance of this special kind of entrepreneurship and further remarked how positive its impact on society actually is.¹⁴ Furthermore, she argued that female immigrants are far too often victim of racism and that there is a serious lack of policies targeting their exploitation.

Most of migrant entrepreneurs operate in the service industry (70%)¹⁵, especially in the fields of little business and accommodation. According to Confcommercio, nearly 16% of female migrants who become entrepreneurs are Chinese. The following table shows their different geographical origins¹⁶:



¹² Caritas Internationalis, *The Female Face of Migration* (2012)

¹³ R. Zetter, *Immigration, Social Cohesion and Social Capital, What are the links?*, Joseph Rowntree Foundation, Oxford University (2006)

¹⁴ http://www.ansamed.info/ansamed/it/notizie/rubriche/politica/2017/03/07/8-marzo-donne-anche-noi-storie-di-riscatto-di-migranti_10b41846-9366-4ed1-8c3c-933ba8ce1ac7.html

¹⁵ <http://27esimaora.corriere.it/articolo/reinventarsi-imprenditricela-sfida-delle-immigrate-alla-crisi/>

¹⁶ Censis and Confcommercio, *Donne immigrate e imprenditoria* (2011)

Another peculiarity highlighted by the research conducted by Confcommercio concerns the age of migrant entrepreneurs: nearly all of them are younger than 50. The young age of this special category of workers suggests a couple of possible reasons. First and foremost, it has to be noted that the world in which these younger migrants live is more inter-connected than ever. Everywhere in the world, young women have the chance to witness groundbreaking events unfold, discover new ideas and break free from a net of gender-based constraints. As a consequence of this, young migrants are more ambitious than before and more conscious of their rights.

Another crucial point is that young immigrants of both sexes are less likely to abide to gender stereotypes, as a research conducted on young British Muslims by the think tank Demos shows¹⁷. More than half of 16- to 24-year-olds disagreed with the statement: “*A husband’s job is to earn money, a wife’s job is to look after the home and family.*” Another finding of the research showed that there is a steadily increasing number well-educated migrants in Britain.

Furthermore, this change of mentality had a radical impact on Western women and feminism too. On a general level, the goal of feminism is the economic, social and political equality of the sexes.¹⁸ In order to achieve this, feminist theory has always investigated the causes of inequality and injustice which, in the first place, were considered to be patriarchy, the lack of financial independence and so on. However, in the recent years feminist theory has gone through a silent revolution - which was triggered off by the ever-existing flows of migration - by introducing the concept of intersectional feminism. American professor Kimberlé Crenshaw stated that intersectional feminism is:

*“The view that women experience oppression in varying configurations and in varying degrees of intensity. Cultural patterns of oppression are not only interrelated, but are bound together and influenced by the intersectional systems of society. Examples of this include race, gender, class, ability, and ethnicity.”*¹⁹

So, thanks to the contribution of migrant feminists, a movement, which was in danger of stagnating and becoming far too “privilege-focused”, managed to gain momentum again and address the issues of gender inequality in a more effective and coherent way. Moreover, the question of the importance of migrant women in the fight for gender equality and women’s rights has been incredibly highlighted by groundbreaking events such as the Women’s March on 21st January 2017. It has to be noted that in the U.S.A., 53% of white women voted for Donald Trump despite his sexist remarks, while black women were probably some of his staunchest enemies. Apart from one’s

¹⁷ <https://www.theguardian.com/world/2015/jul/13/british-muslims-gender-roles-attitude-shift>

¹⁸ Chimamanda Ngozi Adichie, *We Should All Be Feminists*, Fourth Estate (2014)

¹⁹ <http://www.telegraph.co.uk/women/womens-life/10572435/Intersectional-feminism.-What-the-hell-is-it-And-why-you-should-care.html>

political views and beliefs, it might not be exaggerate to say that the actions of migrants, fighting for their rights and empowerment, can and will actually result in an “awakening of conscience” for Western women.

In conclusion, female immigration has its own peculiar features which have to be considered when drafting policies which target the issues of migration, as the role of female immigrants is undeniably fundamental in the shaping of modern society. As a consequence of this, it is important to acknowledge the fact that their endeavours, issues and actions have silently influenced and culturally enriched our world, ranging from feminist theory to innovative entrepreneurial experiences.