

## Women and migration: three times invisible

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Talking about migration and migrants is impossible without taking into account gender and equal opportunities for men and women. And not only because of the huge numbers, an uninterrupted and increasing flow of 258 million individuals in the world<sup>1</sup>, but because the presence of women, 52.7% of the total<sup>2</sup>, has become increasingly predominant in migration waves in recent decades so much so that the phenomenon has been called the 'feminization' of migration flows.

Only a gender perspective allows us to grasp the social, sex and power relations that come into play in the migratory experience and that characterise the countries of origin and those of arrival, discovering the specificity and potential underlying the migration flows of women.

In recent decades, little has been said about migration. And if discussed, it has been about men only. There has been no mention of female migration at all. The debate on migrant women began in the United States in the 20<sup>th</sup> century. There were also few or no measures aimed at protecting the fundamental rights of migrant women, to whom, despite everything, the Parliamentary Assembly of the Council of Europe recognised a crucial role: in a few decades these women became less invisible and, in some cases, they actively participated in the process of social and economic integration and transformation linked to migratory flows. So much so that the UNFPA Annual Report 2006 reads: *"Female migration is a powerful but silent river... an expanding revolution of movement and empowerment which however remains largely silent"*<sup>3</sup>.

Early research reveals the profile of a passive, backward, submissive and dependent migrant woman with a strong bond to the traditions of her country of origin. Only in the 1970s did women's migration begin to be seen as a new reality with specific char-

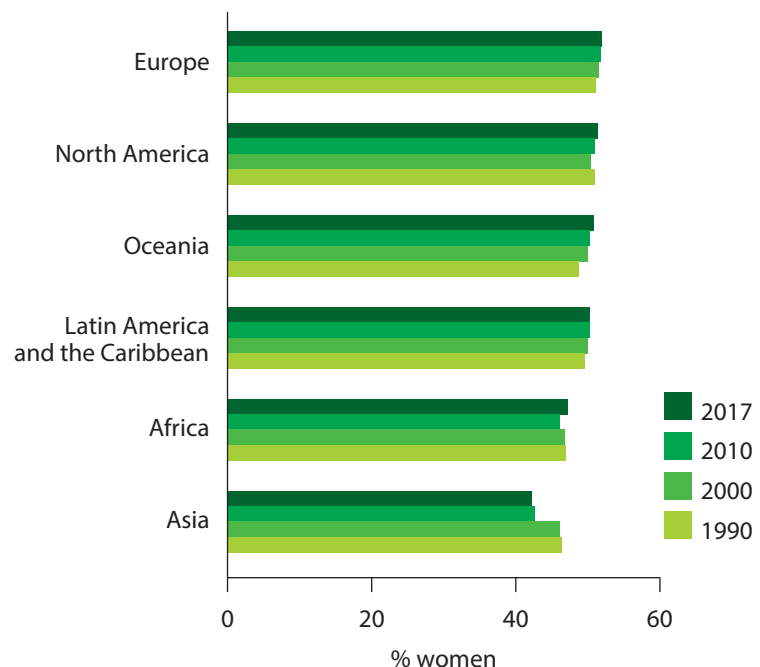
acteristics. Instead of invisible and passive, migrant women became active protagonists of social and economic life; their role changed, but the invisibility in part remained. They were three times invisible: as women who were migrants and segregated at home; as members of a complex and particular job market; as figures ignored by scholars and the media who did not see them, so these women did not exist in the perception of public opinion.

Female migrants were burdened by the disadvantage of being women, weaker, more fragile, more vulnerable, and therefore discriminated against at various levels, but studies on the evolution of migration have also shown that migrant women have, compared to migrant men, a greater capacity to innovate, to find resources and solutions, and to create 'networks'<sup>4</sup>. Marginalised, excluded but strongly present as domestic workers and caregivers, they save money and send remittances, and establish links between tradition and change<sup>5</sup>. One thing is certain: the emancipation of Italian women since the 1970s has inevitably intersected that of migrants. Women

migrate because of economic need, but also to escape discrimination and war; they migrate with a man or alone, perhaps to reunite with their family<sup>6</sup>. Migrant women show a strong social activism: they maintain ties with their land of origin, but they know how to establish new ties in the country of arrival; they are women with working and cultural skills capable of implementing strategies to adapt to the different situations that they need to face from time to time. The first generation of migrants accomplished long-term migration projects and was able to build strong social networks; the second generation, also due to very stringent immigration laws, is made up mostly of women who are often illegal migrants; they are weaker and often forced to work in the shadows.

Italy, which for over a century was a country from where migrants mostly left, has been witnessing since the 1970s the first migratory inflows with a massive presence of women from the very beginning<sup>7</sup>. Until then, it had been the women of the South who had migrated to the regions of Central

**Figure 1.** Percentage of women among all international migrants by region of destination, 1990-2017.



Modified from: United Nations, International Migration Report 2017.

and Northern Italy, where they were employed as full-time servants in middle-class families. Then everything changed: family, society, work, and the economy.

The first to arrive in Italy, thanks also to the intermediation of the Church, were the Filipinos and Cape Verdeans in the 1970s. They were the pioneers, the first breadwinners, Catholics, and meek; they came 'alone', and easily found employment as household helps for the growing demand of Italian families. In the 1980s, it was the turn of women who fled from African and Middle Eastern countries at war. They were Muslim women who were noticed mostly for the veil they wore; they arrived in the 1990s to join their spouses who had migrated years earlier. In those years there was a yet another change in the social landscape: there was less demand for domestic work, mostly paid by the hour, and more for work to take care of children and the elderly. The Iron Curtain collapsed and in the 2000s many women arrived from Eastern Europe: white, non-Muslim, and educated. They migrated alone: scholars speak of a "global heart transplant" because these migrants left their hus-

bands and children at home to take care of our children and elderly. They are many but present in the shadows. The 'caregiver' phenomenon broke out and was characterised by low wages and difficult working conditions. Care work became a trap because there was no career progression and migrant women earned less than migrant men employed in other sectors.

In many cases, the migrant women were the only breadwinners in their families and by then numerous studies confirmed that migrants sent home more money than their male counterparts, contributing with their remittances not only to support their families at home but also the economy of their country of origin<sup>8</sup>. Worldwide, migrant remittances amount to more than USD 230 billion, and women are the driving force behind this flow of capital<sup>9</sup>.

Migrant women are better at building organised "networks"<sup>10</sup> than men; there are countless networks across Italy, within which they pool their working and cultural knowledge, as well as their organisational, planning and relational skills. Migrant women invent new life paths and multiple strategies to adapt to the dif-

ferent situations they have to face, helping to transform, and give meaning to, the migratory experience, maintaining links with their roots, while enriching the new socio-cultural context of life.

With the collaboration of:

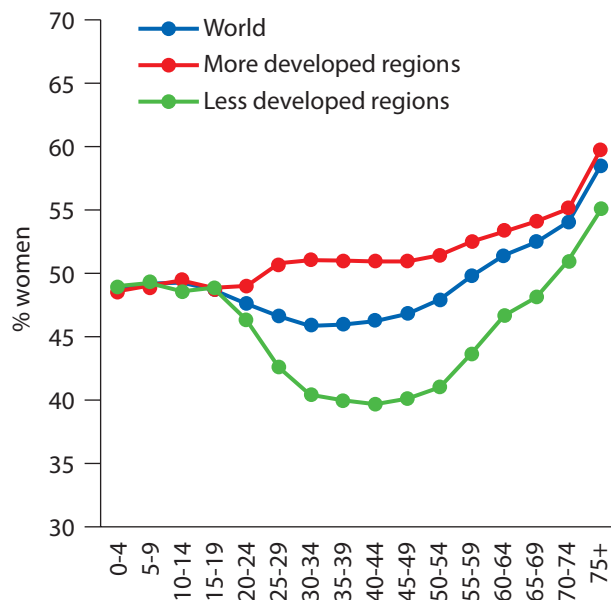
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## Notes

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3. UNFPA Annual Report 2006. <https://www.unfpa.org/publications/unfpa-annual-report-2006>. Lo United Nations Population Fund è stato istituito nel 1969 ed è l'organo centrale delle Nazioni Unite per le questioni sulla popolazione.
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7. Elia A, Fantozzi P (a cura di). Tra globale e locale. Esperienze e percorsi di ricerca sulle migrazioni. Soveria Mannelli (Cz): Rubettino Editore, 2013.
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9. Rapporto UNFPA 2006.
10. Frias ML. Migranti e native: la sfida di camminare insieme. In: Donne, migrazione, diversità la sfida di oggi e domani. Roma: Istituto Poligrafico e Zecca dello Stato, 2002.

**Figure 2.** Percentage female among all international migrants by age and development group, 2017.



Modified from: United Nations, International Migration Report 2017.