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GIOVANNA BRUNETTA

WOMEN IMMIGRANTS IN ITALY

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Giovanna BRUNETTA Dario CROCE Giorgio ZANON

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WOMEN IMMIGRANTS IN ITALY (*)

Migration into Italy has increased ever since the early 1970s. However, although during those years, the phenomenon was due to return migration, i.e., Italian nationals returning to their own country, after the economic recession due to the oil crisis, in the 1980s and early 1990s migration increasingly involved foreign nationals (200,000in 1974, 781,000 in 1990, almost 923,000 in 1994, according to data on foreigners' sojourn permits issued by the Ministry for Internal Affairs).

From being a country subject to emigration, Italy must now definitely be considered one subject to immigration, although some emigration, especially from the south, still continues. The presence of foreigners in Italy for the moment must be considered quite modest, being 1.4% of the national total according to official data. This percentage is very low when compared with the 9% of foreigners in Belgium, 8% in Germany, more than 6% in France and more than 3% in the United Kingdom.

Increased demand for low-grade labour as a result of economic expansion, and also strict control at the frontiers of Northern European states and the easier access permitted by the Italian coastline, have encouraged the arrival in Italy of immigrants mainly from developing countries, particularly from North Africa.

In turn, official regularization of sojourn in Italy following the recent law no. 39 of February 28 1990 (the so-called Martelli law, after its promoter, which allowed a large number of 'submerged' or 'clandestine' immigrants to legitimize their previously illegal position) has accelerated the entry of immigrants from Third World countries — to the point that, at the present time, at least according to the number of official sojourn permits, it exceeds the number of immigrants from economically advanced countries which has always prevailed in Italy. Push pressures by countries of origin rather than demand pull, as in the 1950s, 1960s and 1970s, have led to this "new migration" which is affecting Italy, too in the 1980s and 1990s.

1. Women immigrants

Women's acquisition of the status of individuals clearly differentiated from men, not only from the biological but also from the social standpoint, has led to increasing interest in women's studies. However, attention has mainly focused on two demographic components, fertility and mortality, and less on the social component regarding migration. This lesser scientific interest in migrant women may be linked to how migrations were considered in the past, i.e., population movements aiming at cancelling or at least reducing economic imbalances between areas of different levels of development, and not as complex phenomena in which individuals may and indeed must play roles as actors.

In Italy, women's migration was the topic of an international symposium held at Cagliari in 1983 on women's role in such migratory movements. More recently, single geographers like M. Marengo and G. Cortesi have worked on this subject.

The aim of the present work is to give an overall view of the presence of foreign women in Italy, and to attempt to identify some of their itineraries according to the latest theoretical approaches.

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2. Women's immigration into Italy

2.1. Statistical sources

The most immediate problem which arises is that of obtaining the right data for analysis. First, it must be noted that none of the official sources (Ministry for Internal Affairs, Ministry of Labour and Social Security, ISTAT [government statistics bureau]) provides exhaustive data on immigration. Second, official sources do not always report data subdivided by sex and in any case refer to people with official sojourn permits and not to the clandestine fraction which is high in Italy, especially in the south.

The present study uses in particular data from the recent population census (1991), which identifies both 'resident' and 'temporarily present' foreigners. Of the latter, as well as 'occasional presences' (hotel visitors staying less than one month) for tourism, business or other reasons, the data consider those who, for the sake of brevity, are called 'foreigners of no fixed abode', i.e., those who have recently entered Italy and/or whose presence is mobile and precarious. In reality, the publication of the census results, do not maintain this distinction, thus reducing the possibility of obtaining indirect data on clandestinity, by its very nature difficult to measure statistically. However, at least from a preliminary analysis carried out by ISTAT on provisional census data, it appears that 'occasional presences' are quite frequent among foreigners from developed countries. Vice versa, they are very rare (average 1%) among foreigners from developing countries or those which are politically or economically unstable (ISTAT, 1993).

Data on resident foreigners refer on one hand to a very small part of the population living in Italy. On the other, these foreigners enjoy facilities and generally have long-term migration plans. In other words, they interact in a deeper and more lasting manner with the socio-economic structures of the host country.

2.2. A still irrelevant and highly differentiated number

Unlike the situation in other countries, in Italy women rather than men started the immigration process. In the early 1970s, the unwillingness of Italian women to accept domestic or similar 'lowgrade' jobs led to a migratory flow, mainly of women, from African and Asian countries. This phenomenon, although involving the whole of Europe and the United States, took on its own particular aspects in Italy. The reason for this peculiarity, as shown by Arena (1983) was and still is religion. In African and Asiatic countries (Somalia, Ethiopia, Capo Verde and Madagascar in Africa; the Philippines and Sri Lanka in Asia), the most popular religion, or at least the religion followed by very active minorities, is Catholicism. And since it is women who live in closer contact with religion and with religious institutions, at the moment of emigration it is women who receive more help from such institutions. The preferred country is Italy and the preferred city is Rome, the centre of Christianity and the city in which very many religious orders have their mother-houses.

The process of immigration has become accentuated in time, to the extent that on October 20 1991 the number of foreign women resident in Italy totalled 167,743. However, they only represented 0.29% of the resident Italian population, a figure which rises to 0.50% if temporarily present, women are also included. But in any case the numbers are extremely low compared with those of other countries.

Their distribution (fig. 1) is not uniform, since over 80% of the women live in the centre of Italy (40%) and the north (41%). This is very probably due to the fact that these two areas of Italy offer better possibilities of stabilization and of jobs. The south often only represents a starting-point for further movements. Although the

percentage of women temporarily present in the north rises to 47% and although occasional presences may of course be neglected, it may be hypothesized that a high number of women'of no fixed abode' moved to

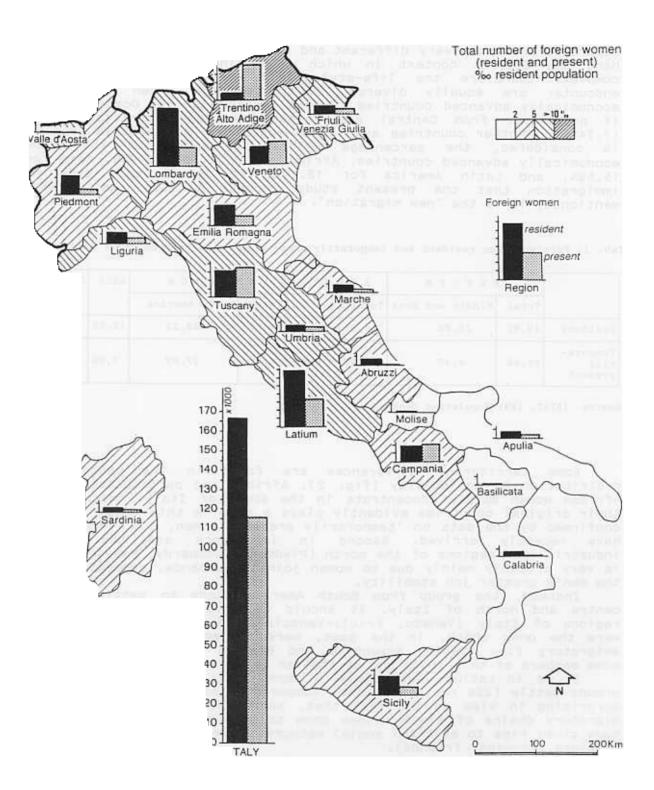


Fig. 1. Distribution of resident and temporarily present foreign women in Italy (ISTAT, 1991 Population Census).

the north after the Martelli law came into force, both due (as already mentioned) to better job opportunities and to the greater efficiency of temporary on-arrival facilities established for them under the Martelli law and of social structures.

Foreign women migrate to Italy from extremely varied places (tab. 1) and this fact must be borne in mind if simplifying generalizations are to be avoided. On one hand, the structural contexts of the departure areas are very different and extremely complex; on the other hand the Italian context in which they find themselves is also complex, therefore the life-styles and difficulties which they encounter are equally diverse. 55.35% of the women come from economically advanced countries (Europe, North America, Oceania). But if provenance from Central and Eastern European countries alone (7.74%) and other countries such as ex-Jugoslavia and Albania (7.87%) is considered, the percentage shifts in favour of the less economically advanced countries. Africa accounts for 16.85%, Asia for 15.58%, and Latin America for 12.19%. It is on this type of immigration that the present study focuses because, as already mentioned, it is the "new migration".

Tab. 1. Foreign women resident and temporarily present in Italy by country of origin (%).

	Region	EUROPE	AF	RICA	A	MERICA	ASIA	OCEANIA	
	Total	Middle and East	Total	North	Total	Latin America		,	
Resident	48,92	15,83	16,85	53,10	17,87	68,22	15,58	0,75	
Tempora- rily present	66,48	8,47	7,37	35,47	18,09	37,98	7,05	0,98	

Source: ISTAT, 1991 Population Census.

Some territorial differences are found in the pattern of distribution by nationality (fig. 2). African and particularly North African women mainly concentrate in the south of Italy. Nearness to their original countries evidently plays a role in this case, as also confirmed by the data on 'temporarily present' women, i.e., those who have recently arrived. Second in importance are the highly industrialized regions of the north (Piedmont, Lombardy, Veneto). This is very probably mainly due to women joining husbands, connected with the men's greater job stability.

Instead, the group from South America tends to settle in the centre and north of Italy. It should be noted that the northern regions of Italy (Veneto, Friuli-Venezia-Giulia, Liguria, Piedmont) were the ones which, in the past, were subjected to the greatest emigratory flow towards Argentina and Brazil. Probably, therefore, some members of this group are of Italian descent.

It is in Latium, but mainly in Rome, that most of the Asiatic groups settle (22% residents, 14% 'temporarily present'). This is not surprising in view of the fact that, as mentioned above, the first migratory chains of single women come to this region. In time, they have given rise to atypical social networks, almost exclusively female (sisters, cousins, friends).

2.3. Structural aspects

Study of female immigration is important when formulating any kind of hypothesis on the future of immigrants in Italy. The ratios

between men and women inside each ethnic group, the equilibria created between male and female immigrants, with respect to the kinds of work done by the two sexes, and the formation of families and social networks not composed exclusively of either men orwomen, are essential elements in the process of stabilization, still extremely fragile in Italy.

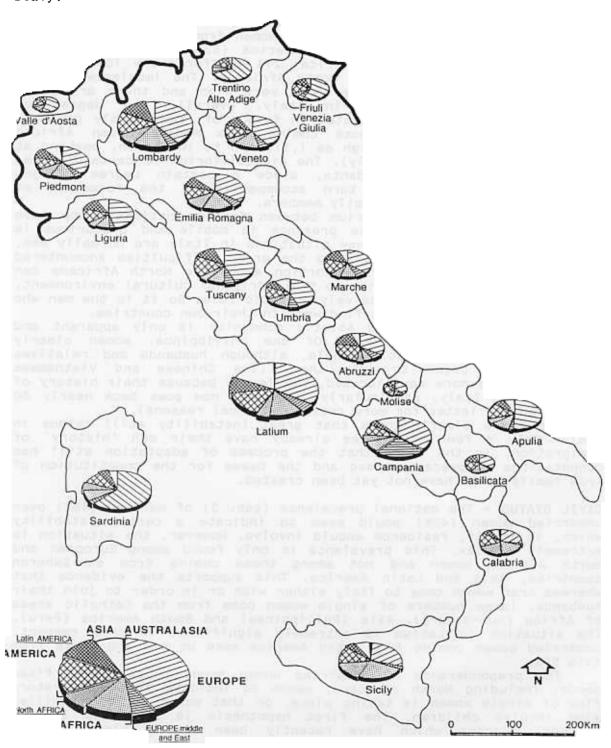


Fig. 2. Foreign women in Italy by country of origin and region of residence in Italy (ISTAT, 1991 Population Census).

Tab. 2. Sex ratio between foreign resident and temporarily present men and women, by country of origin (women = 100)

	EUROPE	EUROPE Middle and East	AFRICA	NORTH AFRICA	AMERICA	LATIN AMERICA	ASIA	OCEANIA	TOTAL
Resident	77,02	57,99	274,49	359,92	62,52	52,92	106,85	71,87	112,31
Temporarily present	107,68	158,31	570,29	1110,53	97,08	87,10	213,58	87,13	147,59

Source: ISTAT, 1991 Population Census.

Tab. Civil status of women resident and temporarily present in Italy, by country of origin (%).

669 969 100 100	EUROPE		EUROPE Middle and East		AFRICA		NORTH AFRICA		AMERICA		LATIN AMERICA		ASIA		OCEANIA	
971	sing.	married	sing.	married	sing.	married	sing.	married	sing.	married	sing.	married	sing.	married	sing.	married
Resident	40,95	49,01	28,57	60,20	47,03	45,75	42,89	51,19	49,97	43,91	53,10	42,12	48,70	47,57	44,86	43,20
Temporarily present		52,90	58,86	31,96	55,70	37,58	51,83	41,92	51,26	41,45	64,72	26,83	53,75	40,71	45,40	43,83

Source: ISTAT, 1991 Population Census.

AGE - The age structure (fig. 3) of foreign women is of particular significance, since it supplies information on an available labour force, on the dimension of the active labour force, and above all on the demographic future of the population (women of fertile age).

Immigrant women are mainly between 25 and 34 years of age, with oscillations within this age-group ranging from 39% for Latin American women, 38% for Africans and 30% for Europeans. This age-group reveals the greatest differences between men and women, whereas of the Africans, half are men and only one-third women; on the contrary, of the Latin Americans, women prevail (39%) over men (29%). It is clear that, for African women, arrival in Italy is still motivated by the desire to join their families, while for Latin American women it is the need for work which prevails.

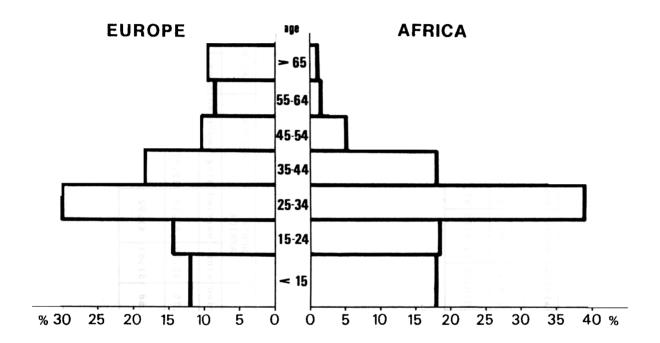


Fig. 3. Age structure of European and African foreign women resident in Italy (ISTAT: 1991 Population Census).

The percentages of resident girl children (<15 years) are also significant, being around 12% and peaking at 22% for North African girls as opposed to 9% of those of no fixed abode (Albanian and ex-Jugoslav: 22%). This is explained by the greater possibility of creating or recomposing family units, due to the lower precariousness which resident status makes feasible. However, apart from slight differences, more than 80% of foreign women are concentrated in the age-range of the active population (15-64 years); about half are between 15 and 34 and 66.80% are of fertile age (15-44 years): therefore they can increase the birthrate.

WORK - In spite of the high number of active resident women, only 33% are in fact working and 13% are unemployed. This is really a very small fraction, although in some regions (Veneto, Lombardy, Emilia-Romagna) the percentage rises to 38%. The women work almost exclusively (80%) in the services sector, 16% in industry and only 4% in agriculture. For foreign women too, therefore, segregation within

the services sector is confirmed since the jobs involved are low-grade and marginal (almost all involving housework or similar). Although at the limits of significance, there is a certain distribution by area: in the southern Italian regions (Basilicata, Puglia, Campania) women tend to work in agriculture, and in the centre and north in non-agricultural sectors, thus following the Italian productive structure. In particular, work in the services sector, widespread throughout Italy, reaches 91% in Latium.

Another noteworthy aspect is that nearly half the women in employment (43%) are of European origin, thus partially reducing the quotas of women from developing countries (19% from Asia, 16% from Africa, 11% from Latin America). According to these data, it would not be excessive to state that, although it is difficult for men to find jobs, for women any other job but housework is practically impossible.

Most resident women (67%) thus live in Italy in a non-professional state, by choice or by necessity. 37% are housewives; this percentage rises to 52% for the North Africans, indicating that, in Italy too, they continue to work inside the home.

3. From 'space' in the country of origin to Italy

After this review, based on census data, of the most salient aspects of the world of foreign women who are best established in Italy, since they are resident, let us go further into the migratory 'itineraries' which led women to move from their original countries to Italy, in an attempt to study immigration as a social event, in this case specifically female. Considering migrant women in their role as social actors involves — as theory suggests (Woods, 1985; Lim, 1988; Marengo, 1995) — reconstructing the cultural environment of their original country, their relations with their national cultural environment, and the reasons which led them to decide to emigrate. As the quantitative approach used until now is not suitable for this type of analysis, we will refer to surveys conducted in Italy by means of questionnaires and interviews.

3.1. Maghreb women: difficulties involved in breaking bonds with the community

In a highly traditional society like that of the Muslim African world, the amount of 'space' assigned to women is very different from that assigned to men, since women have no public space but only private space reserved exclusively for them. Excluded in this way from any role involving space which is not private, women are unable to contribute actively towards decisions regarding emigration. For women, and above all for the community, to pass beyond the frontier of private space in order to reach public space would be an act of rebellion, a lack of respect for the group's tradition. So there are still very few women who follow the men's example and dare to break the bonds of the community and flout its laws (Marengo, 1995). In particular, this happens in Maghreb countries whose populations observe the law of the Koran. In Islam, women are 'inferior beings' and thus practically deprived of any possibility of making free choices and totally subjected, by tradition and culture, to male supremacy (Arena, 1983). Emigration plans are therefore taken by the whole community which, in order to obtain the extra money, delegates someone to go and work abroad. In order to safeguard group integrity and avoid the weakening of family links, wives, and later children, are entrusted to the authority of the enlarged family which replaces the absent men to safeguard the honour of the group: women without men are considered a threat to this sense of honour (Horchani Zamiti, 1995).

It should be noted, however, that this traditional system has now

partly lost its ancient rigour and women no longer play an exclusively passive role. Although when husbands leave, wives remain within the ambit of the enlarged family, and the role they play in the family constellation after the absence of the official head of the family and the weakening of traditional solidarity links, leaves them an increasing margin of freedom. The fact that they now have to do jobs previously reserved for the men makes them 'voluntarily' but also compulsorily penetrate at least part of the male public domain. In this way, the women come to be the heads of the family and become aware not only of their own space but also partly of male space, both private and public. However, it must also be noted that acceptance of the role of substitute head of the family only really represents female adaptation to family plans, since women do not yet have the opportunity to transform it into personal plans (Marengo, 1995). Data on the percentages of female heads of the family are somewhat fragmentary and cannot always be compared, although there is reason to believe that they now account for a significant quota of the total number of families and are on the increase. This is shown by the growing spread of nuclear families and of the independence of family units. In Tunisia, for example, according to 1984 census data, the women of emigrants living in their own houses numbered 42,500, 5,000 lived with their husbands' families, and 1,830 lived with their own families. A recent survey, again in Tunisia, showed that most of the women interviewed lived alone with their children. This relatively new practice is doubtless favoured by the possibility of buying a house, a feasible with the money emigrant husbands earn fact only made (Horchani Zamiti, 1995). This greater autonomy and greater responsibility on the part of women indicates that they may also make more autonomous decisions. However, the statistical data stress that, for the moment, in most African countries and with few exceptions, it is women who follow men in cases of emigration.

On their arrival in Italy, African and particularly Maghreb women experience a sense of disorientation not only of space but also of identity, which is difficult to overcome. This is because Italian spatial and relational organization, rather than accepting women from more traditional societies, enhances their diversity, excluding them and thus delaying the already difficult confrontation between the female world they know and that of the industrialized Italian society in which they find themselves (Marengo, 1995). As the migratory flow in question is quite recent, there is no already established ethnic community to welcome them. Maghreb women are thus obliged to reconstruct friendships and points of reference, counting essentially on the support but also the approval of their husbands whom they have followed or joined. On their first impact with Italy, they create a private space in which they again play the same roles they have always had decided for them. The home is thus transformed into a solitary space. Although the birth of a child may relieve some of the boredom and solitude, it also involves further difficulties, since caring for children, in the absence of parental help, prolongs women's isolation, preventing them from working outside the home. Maternity and jobs are difficult to reconcile. Their culture and religion oblige them to follow a well-defined order of priorities: the care and wellbeing of children take priority over work outside the home. On the personal level, these priorities, although accepted as normal in their original countries, do not always seem to be experienced in a tranquil and positive way in Italy. If we add to this the fact that the women are obliged wear their traditional clothing, Maghreb women fall into those groups which Taboada-Leonetti (1983) calls 'guardians of tradition', the whole within an ambit of pure passivity. In other countries where immigration is not recent, adaptation to the new reality is evidently greater.

3.2 Breaking bonds: Philippino women

Transformation and destructuring of traditional society have been taking place for some time now in the Philippines, so that new lifestyles and models of behaviour co-exist, implying greater autonomy for women and forms of survival of the enlarged family. According to interview data (Campani, 1989), equilibria inside families are highly unstable, and individual choices now tend to predominate over collective family ones. The dramatic economic situation in the Philippines is accompanied by complex social phenomena, destructuring of traditional life-styles, mass education, and higher aspirations and expectations on the part of a strongly Westernized section of the population. It is precisely this section which, in the expectation of improved living conditions but unable to find suitable employment, emigrates. More than autonomous decisions taken by individual women, these are generally decisions taken by the family. Italy is seen as allowing access at last to consumer society, to that Western way of life conveyed by mass media and dreamt of by Philippino women. Although some state that they were obliged to emigrate, others recognize the desire to lead their own lives. A linear model can thus be identified which views Western society as the end of a process of development in which the society of the original country is the first stepping-stone (Picciolini, 1991). In reality, in Italy Philippino women live on the fringe of consumer society, but their lives increasingly tond to be inspired by the Western model. They have in the first stepping tond to be inspired by the Western model. increasingly tend to be inspired by the Western model. They begin to dress in Western clothes, their space becomes larger, they go out unaccompanied, first in their own neighbourhood and then further away. For almost all of them, as already mentioned, their jobs are limited to housework. This prevents them from having their own families, although recently the possibility of part-time work has allowed them to be joined by husbands and children. However, the time the children spend in Italy is still quite unstable, since there is a strong tendency to leave existing children in the Philippines or to take children born in Italy back to the Philippines. This is due both to the difficulty of reconciling maternity and work, and of the desire to give the children the chance of beginning school in their own country, with the prospect of mother's return home in the medium term.

To state that Philippino women do find better conditions in Italy than those left behind would be hazardous, to say the least. It is only thanks to their contacts through associations that they are able to reconstruct a network of female friendships inside groups composed of women of the same origin, which allow them to establish links which were often broken at the moment of emigration and from which they now draw their traditional sense of security. According to the groups proposed by Taboada-Leonetti (1983), Philippino women may be called 'les instrumentalistes', in the sense that they experience emigration as a parenthesis, as a break in their lives. The changes they experience are considered as necessary for life in Italy but also as superficial and reversible, in that they do not influence their cultural identity. Evidence of this is the general lack of interest in learning the Italian language. The gap between Philippino and Italian salaries continues to be the mainspring which convinces Philippino women to come to Italy, in the hope of being able to return home eventually. Only a few of them may be called 'les promotionnelles', in the sense that emigration represents a change which they face deliberately.

CONCLUSIONS

A considerable lack of equilibrium between the sexes, the difficulties and limitations encountered by foreign women in entering the job market, and still essentially female or male social networks all reveal the extreme precariousness of immigrant communities in Italy. In most countries, two main factors determine some degree of stabilization: the arrival of family members, and mixed marriages. However, in Italy this is far from being the case. Of 'temporarily present' women, according to census data, only 16% entered Italy to join their husbands — a very low figure, although it does rise to 32% for North African women. Although there is reason to suppose that wives joining husbands, etc. according to the Martelli law, are steadily increasing, we cannot speak of true settling down. The lack of proper accommodation makes it extremely difficult to bring in family members, even when, as in the Veneto, the men have found secure jobs in industry (Bragato and Toniolo Trivellato, 1993). Italy thus continues to be a country of transit towards other destinations.

However, there are also women who, like the Philippinos, arrive in Italy with plans already involving a definite return to their own country after having earned enough money to educate their children properly, build a house of their own and start up their own business. The first two goals are relatively easy to achieve, but the third, given the serious economic situation still prevailing in the Philippines, is more difficult. So departure from Italy is continually postponed, the return home becomes a myth, and there are already some who, after returning home, come back to Italy. It may therefore be said that immigration into Italy is temporary, dictated either by need or by individual choice. One of the features which, according to Salt (1989), is characteristic of the new map of international migrations is thus confirmed.

When a certain degree of stabilization rather than rapid cultural assimilation into the new environment occurs, the structuring is 'interstitielle', in the sense that women construct a representative space both of their original countries and of the countries to which they migrate (Piette, 1990).

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