

Organizing women migrants: The Filipino and Cape Verdean women's associations in Rome

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Abstract

Migrant women's associations in Italy did not simply emerge from informal networks. The Filipino and Cape Verdean women's associations in Rome are examples of the results of multiple factors that contributed to the strategy of self-organization established by migrant women with the intention of empowering themselves. An awareness of their unique position as women from mostly-female migrant groups, a lack of institutional bodies prepared to assist them, and the leadership of individual women were key aspects in the formation of the first migrant women's associations in Rome. Gender and nationality were the main components of migrant women's organizing in the first mostly-female migrant groups.

Keywords: associations; Italy; empowerment strategies; women; Cape Verde; the Philippines.

Introduction

Like its southern European neighbours Spain and Greece, Italy has seen dramatic increases in its immigrant population in recent decades. The country has also become well-known for the diversity of its foreign residents (Grillo 2002). Until quite recently, however, migration researchers assumed that the migration patterns in southern Europe largely resembled the guest-worker model in northern Europe and overlooked the gendered component of post World-War II migrations (Kofman et al 2000; Anthias and Lazaridis 2000). In ground-

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breaking studies of women immigrants to Italy, several researchers began to document the presence of predominantly female migrant groups (Campani 1990; Favaro and Borgogna 1991). The early migrations of women from the Philippines, Cape Verde, Eritrea, and some parts of South America differed greatly from those of mixed-sex migratory groups, in which women often joined male family members.²

This article argues that the formation of migrant women's organizations within mostly-female migrant populations is tied directly to a consciousness of gender and nationality and driven by the vision of migrant women's leaders. It shows that the first women immigrants to Rome from the Philippines and Cape Verde constructed their own means of empowerment, largely from within self-organized associations. An awareness of a lack of structures in place to cope with the gender-based needs of migrant women led them to autonomous organizing. A brief overview of female migration to Italy from the Philippines and Cape Verde is offered before existing narratives about the early formation of migrant women's associations are rethought. The article concludes with some ideas as to what migrant women's associations might suggest about gender, migration, and empowerment strategies. A feminist methodology is used and sources include semi-structured interviews and informal conversation with the founders of two women's associations in Rome, the associations' own studies and publications, empirical data, and participant observation.

Female migrations to Italy

In the 1970s, female migrations represented no more than 30% of total migrations to Italy (Campani 1990; Caritas 2002b).³ This number gradually increased to nearly 46% by 2000 (Caritas 2002). Worldwide figures are similar: the

² A version of this paper including a discussion of Eritrean and South American migrant groups was presented at the 2005 Berkshire Conference on the History of Women held at Scripps College in California USA.

³ Exact figures are difficult to precise; these are estimates.

United Nations reports that female migrations accounted for 35% of total migrations in 1965 and 48% in 2000 (United Nations 2002). These percentages reveal that female migrants have represented a consistent and growing presence. What the data do not tell, however, is the fact that within certain populations, women made up as much as 90% of the first immigrants to Italy (Campani 1990, 4; Macioti and Pugliese 2003, 111). While lone males from northern African countries entered the country in the 1970s to fill manufacturing jobs in cities where the “economic miracle” was well underway, women also began migrating. Women from the Philippines and Cape Verde came to Italy to fill domestic roles in the homes of wealthy Italians and in those where more middle-class women were beginning to enter the workforce (Andall 1998; Basa and Jing de la Rosa 2004; Bozzoni et al 1991; Caritas et al 2003; Chell 1997; Parreñas 2001; Tacoli 1999).

Conditions in Italy

When migrant women first arrived in Italy they found a system that was completely unprepared to cope with immigration, let alone any special issues related to the sex of new migrants. Accustomed to treating migration as a male dominated and temporary movement, the Italian government appeared only even vaguely aware of the growing numbers of migrant women entering the homes of Italian families throughout the country. Before passage of Law 943 in 1986, which was designed primarily to regularize immigrants, Italian immigration policy was vague and unevenly applied (Colombo and Sciortino 2004). A lack of attention to the regulation of persons seeking entry into Italy matched only the government’s nearly complete disregard for immigrants already residing there. It is thus not surprising that the few social services available to immigrants were set up to deal with new arrivals on an emergency basis only.

The unpreparedness of official bodies to cope with immigrants meant that the Italian government was forced to rely on other organizations in the hopes of meeting at least some basic needs such as shelter and health care (Danese 1998 and

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1998b). The Catholic charities Caritas and Sant'Egidio and non-governmental organizations attempted to assist new immigrants. Most of these groups were not equipped to meet the full range of migrants' needs, however. Temporary shelters were overfilled and understaffed. Staff members were ill-prepared to answer questions about legal rights, employment status, or to provide referrals to medical facilities or counselling centres (Zincone 2000 and 2001). Moreover, a lack of resources and loose ties to one another meant that these organizations were not well-coordinated on regional or national levels.

Italian-led bodies of all types were especially weak in their treatment of gender and ethnic differences within the migrant population. The precarious status of women migrants was often overlooked even when they were organized on the basis of gender. For example, the ACLI-COLF, a trade union of domestic workers, downplayed the specific concerns of migrant women (Andall 2000). Discriminatory practices by landlords prevented many migrant women from seeking their own apartments and moving out of the live-in domestic sector, but no bodies were in place to lobby on behalf of their rights (Dell'Olio 2004). Migrant women were sometimes frightened off from seeking medical attention if they had difficulty communicating with staff members or if they were weary of western medicine (Melchiori 1999).

Of course, not all female migrants required special services immediately upon their arrival in Italy. Women from mostly-female migrant groups were usually placed in Italian homes as domestic workers by the Church or employment agencies. Others migrated through networks that were established by the first arrivals. Social networks are well-documented in cases of family migrations and family reunifications. The fact, however, that most female migrant groups did not first settle in their own communities but in the homes of their employers complicates traditional theories of network-based migrations.

Migrant women's associations

Although many researchers in Italy rightly emphasize the importance of informal networks in mostly female migrant groups, none has studied in detail, precisely, how migrant women's associations took shape (Campani 2000; Maciotti and Pugliese 2003; Palanca 1999). The story is usually told as – the first immigrant women created migratory chains and informal support networks. These then turned into formal associations. This rather facile explanation neglects to consider how and why migrant women sought their own structures outside those available to them and why they chose to organize formally rather than continuing to meet in city parks or the local *piazza*. It also neglects the role of agency in the activism of migrant women. Campani claims, for example, that “the passage from informal networks to formal associations is not evident in itself, in particular for immigrant women (Campani 2000, 176).”⁴ Instead, the women who created the first migrant women's associations had an intense desire to empower migrant women. They recognized the failings of the Italian government, charitable organizations, and NGOs and opted to seize control of their own situations.

The Cape Verdean Women's Association (known as the OMCVI-Organização das Mulheres Caboverdeanas em Italia) was founded officially in 1988 (Caritas et al 2003). One of the main factors that led the women to self-organize was their awareness of being part of a predominantly female migrant group. Although the Cape Verdean community in Rome had already been organized in a mixed-sex association since 1975, the group was suffering from a lack of direction and from the periodic absences of its leader. No one stepped forward to take control of the association, and it fell apart. At the time, Maria de Lourdes Jesus headed the women's section: “We already had formed this group of people who were interested in the women's commission, and we decided from within more or less the same group to found the Cape Verdean Women's Association in Italy (Jesus 2005).” The

⁴ Translations from Italian are mine.

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successful launching of the association can be attributed to three principle factors. First, the women of the community began to develop a consciousness of their gender-based needs, moving away from general discussions of their problems to the creation of practical strategies for action. Jesus explains that this was something quite new for women like her because “we came from a country that just in my generation had emerged from the colonial period and we were still too young for having used consciousness-raising or for having an awareness regarding our rights ... little was known at that time about what our rights were (Jesus 2005).” The association allowed women to explore new themes with the knowledge that they outnumbered the men in their community.

Second, the women were inspired by the activist spirit of migrant “associationism” that began in 1986 around debates over Law 943. After the passage of the law, which recognized the right of immigrants to form associations, immigrants throughout Italy began to self-organize and create national networks. Immigrant groups became involved in influencing public opinion, legislators, and both governmental and non-governmental organizations on matters regarding their status and rights. The government’s decision to create a national consulting body on immigration that included immigrants led to surge of activity among self-organized migrant associations (Danese 1998). It appeared that the Cape Verdean women would have an opportunity to enter this discourse and highlight the concerns of the migrant women’s community. Jesus says this optimism was especially strong in 1988 when the association was founded.

Finally, Italian women trade union activists provided the Cape Verdean association with office space as well as with a model for organizing on behalf of women's interests. Jesus and a few of her Cape Verdean friends had been meeting with Italian women trade union activists since the 1970s. With these women and feminists from several Italian women’s associations, Jesus participated in many demonstrations and other events connected to the struggle for

women's emancipation and "together with these other women we wanted to bring this debate inside our community with the women of Cape Verde (Jesus 2005)." To be able to do this, they needed meeting space. A group of women from the Confederazione Generale Italiana del Lavoro (CGIL) trade union allowed the migrant women to use one of their rooms, which became the main gathering place of the OMCVI for many years.

The Filipino Women's Council (FWC) became active at about the same time as the Cape Verdean Women's Association though its official founding took place in 1991 (Basa and Jing de la Rosa 2004). Like the Cape Verdean community, the Filipino community in Rome was predominantly female and one of the oldest, but its earliest organizations were mixed-sex groups connected to the labour movement or to the Catholic Church. The vision of a migrant woman leader contributed to a new strategy of self-organizing based on a consciousness of gender and migrant status and gave Filipinas another option. Charito Basa, founder of the Filipino Women's Council, migrated to Italy in 1986 expecting to work in the domestic sector like so many of her co-nationals. However, she secured work in an NGO called Isis International and began to get to know other Filipinas, most of whom did work as domestics (Cabrera-Balleza). Basa heard many stories of women who left their families behind and made sacrifices on their behalf. She also understood the special problems Filipinas faced in their new lives in Italy. So many were very well-educated and had prestigious positions in the Philippines, but they earned more cleaning homes or assisting the elderly in Italy and quickly settled into that role. They worked hard and earned a good reputation, so much so that they could command higher salaries than domestic workers from any other migrant group.

Despite some of the advantages Filipino women had, Basa's work with labour groups and Isis led her to the realization that "there was no response to gender or women-related problems ... so, then I started to think about creating a tiny Filipina women's organization because there were

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already problems coming out. There were problems of violence, discrimination (Basa 2004).” The more she got to know the women of her community and experienced the ineptitude of the government and other organizations to respond to migrant women’s concerns, the more she decided it was essential to self-organize as Filipino women (Basa 2005). The FWC did not rise exclusively from informal networks of domestic workers. Basa’s commitment and vision contributed equally to the formation of the group. Basa went to Filipina gathering places and talked to women on their days off. She attended their informal meetings. However, without Basa’s experience in the NGOs and her ability to inspire migrant women, most of the informal Filipina groups in Rome probably would not have sought recognition as formal associations. Basa is clear to acknowledge the fact that she was in a more privileged position than many other Filipino women because she did not work in Italian homes. She had more time and more personal resources to organize. With help from a foundation in the United States, Basa was able to rent an apartment for the FWC and launch its first projects.

Conclusion

In the examples of both the Cape Verdean Women’s Association and Filipino Women’s Council, we see that women’s associations did not simply emerge from informal networks. Instead, a combination of special conditions contributed to the strategy of autonomous organizing established by migrant women with the intention of empowering their co-nationals. An awareness of their unique position as women from mostly-female migrant groups, a lack of institutional bodies prepared to assist them, and the leadership of individual women were key aspects in the formation of the first migrant women’s associations. Filipino and Cape Verdean women turned to self-organizing as a means to facilitate their integration and to take greater control over their lives. Labour and religious groups within their own communities and Italian-run organizations were available to these women, but they viewed self-organizing in associa-

tions as a way to confront more meaningfully the unique set of circumstances that informed the intersection of gender with their position as migrants.

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