

Arab migration and parenting: the experience of Arab migrant women in Italy

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Abstract

Despite the considerable presence of Arab migrants in Italy and the West, these communities, women in particular, are affected by prejudices, Islamophobic feelings and racist episodes. My work intends to explore the dimension of parenting in Arab migrant women because the experience of maternity can contribute to the wellbeing and the integration of the whole family. The study presents an empirical research based on the ethnographic method and in-depth interviews with mothers belonging to the most populated Arab communities in Milan, Italy, within the framework of the European project ISOTIS – Inclusive education and Social Support to Tackle Inequalities in Society.

Key words: Arab migration; migrant parenthood; gender; ethnography, biographical interviews.

Introduction

Milan is the Italian metropolitan city with the highest number of non-EU citizens legally residing as of January 1, 2017: 440,622, 11.9% of the national total. The most represented communities in Milan, in order, come from: Egypt (14.7%), Philippines (10.6%), China (10.2%), Peru (7.4%), Albania (6.4%), Morocco (6.4%), Ecuador (6.2%) (Giacomello, Mastropietro, Serusi, & Lobello, 2017c).

The Moroccan community, first in terms of number of nationals present in Italy and fifth in Milan, is a historically settled community in Italy going through a phase of progressive but marked stabilization. In 2016, over 35,000 Moroccan citizens obtained Italian citizenship, while amongst the remaining number, 68.9% have a residence permit for long-term residents. Holders of a residence permit subject to renewal, on the other hand, have put down family reasons as the main reason behind requesting residence (61.4%). The Moroccan community is substantially balance on a gender level, with males slightly ahead, representing 54.6%, while women the remaining 45.4%. Furthermore, the number of minors is striking: 124,123, or 27.3% of the total number of Moroccan citizens legally residing in Italy (Giacomello, Mastropietro, Serusi, & Lobello, 2017b).

The Egyptian community in Italy counts on 137,668 individuals, with a clear preponderance in Northern Italy and, in particular, Milan. Compared to the Moroccan community, this is a

community of younger settlement in Italy which, in the period between 2010-2017, saw a population increase of about 41%, slowing down only over the last year. Despite this, it is palpable that the seeds are being planted in terms of a phenomenon that is already widespread within the Moroccan community. Across the last two years, the stabilization process has also started among the migrants of Egyptian origin. In fact, there has been a significant increase in Italian citizenship being attained (3,438 in 2016), while 62.8% of legally residing Egyptian citizens hold a long-term residence permit. The main reasons for residence permits subject to renewal are work (48%) and family reasons (43.7%) which, among the new arrivals in 2016, counted for approximately 68.6% of the total. Within the Egyptian community, there is a gender bias in favor of the male component: men represent 69.1%, while women cover the residing 30.9%. Minors represent a significant portion: 44,880, 32.6% of the total number of Egyptian citizens (Giacomello, Mastropietro, Serusi, & Lobello, 2017a).

Research topic

The current phase of migration process, characterized by stabilizations, family reunifications, moving or creation of new families, adds a certain urgency to the study of parenting in Arab-Muslim migrant women.

Despite the considerable presence of Arab migrants in Italy and the West, these communities are amongst the most impacted by prejudices, Islamophobic feelings and racist episodes. Arab women are often described as veiled, passive, and subjugated by the power of men. They are particularly affected by episodes of prejudice but also by assumptions made by academic research, which entails the risk of condemning them to immobility rather than helping to “free” them (Abu-Lughod, 2002; Ahmed, 1992).

The literature review highlights that Arab women, as mothers, have long been part of studies in the field of anthropology, sociology and psychology; meanwhile there are still insufficient contributions in the educational field. Two moments related to the life of children are subject to particular analysis: birth (Ali & Burchett, 2004; Davies & Papadopoulos, 2006) and adolescence (Aroian et al., 2009; Renzaho, McCabe, & Sainsbury, 2011).

My work analyses the topic of parenting by focusing on the experiences of Arab-Muslim women in relation to the childhood phase. By doing so, an educational perspective is being adopted.

The relevance of such a perspective is twofold: on the one hand it enriches pedagogical reflection in the field of parenting support by adopting a culturally specific perspective, on the other it widens the reflection on a phenomenon discussed at an interdisciplinary level, through the specific contribution of the pedagogical perspective.

This research fits within the framework of the ISOTIS project - Inclusive Education and Social Support to Tackle Inequalities in Society, coordinated by Paul Leseman (Utrecht University) and on the Italian side, Giulia Pastori (Bicocca University) (www.isotis.org). Its

aim is to analyze and tackle the emergence of social and educational inequalities from childhood, with a specific focus on the vulnerability of migrant families.

Theoretical-epistemological framework

The epistemological framework is based on:

- the bio-ecological model of human development of Bronfenbrenner (1986),
- the unified theory of development of Sameroff (2010),
- the concept of developmental niche of Super e Harkness (1986).

Within this epistemological framework, my work lies in the tradition of educational studies on family education (Formenti, 2000; Milani, 2001; Pourtois & Desmet, 1989). In particular, it cites the latest studies on parenting support, which recommend an examination of the child and the relationships with the caregivers inside the family context, alongside a look at how to help parents mobilise their educational potential. The literature in this field, together with Intercultural Pedagogy (Nigris, 2015; Portera, 2013), points out that research on migrant parenthood is needed to promote the well-being and the integration of the whole family (Balsamo, Favaro, Giacalone, Pavesi, & Samaniego, 2002; Iavarone, Marone, & Sabatano, 2015; Silva, 2006, 2012).

In addition to this, my work refers to the studies of Engendering Migration (Pessar & Mahler, 2003) on a theoretical level. It spans the dimension of parenting with gender, because being a migrant woman or a migrant man and being mother or father (Giovannini, 2007) are divergent realities, from which different experiences and representations arise.

The study also follows research that analyses the topic of Arab women from a culturally specific perspective (Ahmed, 1992; Pepicelli, 2010).

Migrant parenthood

Families today are made up very differently amongst themselves (Silva, 2012), in particular the migrant ones. At the same time, they often turn out to be particularly isolated, with a poor social network and a certain “invisibility” concerning care and assistance services (Favaro, 2002).

Each migrant family is a nucleus, which elaborates its migration story in a different way, varying depending on personal vicissitudes, groups of origin and historical-political events. Starting from the re-elaboration of all this material and the degree of welcome upon arrival in the host country, the parental integration dimension is played out, seen as a determining factor regarding protection and children’s well-being (Iavarone et al., 2015).

Parenting is considered an «interpretative and operative category of the parental care relationship» (Iavarone et al., 2015), within which the individual's past as a child, social norms and educational beliefs of the culture of origin and an imaginative tension towards new forms of parenting different from those already known come into play. For the migrant parent, this tension comes about amidst greater drama, feeling torn between the desire of maintaining continuity with the educational models coming from their own culture, the perception of distance from that world, and the fear of betraying it by approaching parental styles from the host country. The family is the context within which the «belonging-identity dynamic» begins (Iavarone et al., 2015, 61), initially as a series of constraints but also coming with possibilities of affirming themselves. Therefore, migrant parents have the opportunity to offer their children cultural references and values that can allow them to transit between different cultures (Silva, 2006). And this realm of possibilities must be protected and stimulated by parenting support programs.

Thesis definition

The study intends to explore the topic of parenting in Arab women in connection with the experience of migration, through the collection of life-stories of Muslim mothers who belong to the most populated Arab groups in Milan. The aim is to explore their experiences as mothers in Italy and their representations about: parenting, childhood, and education.

My leading research questions are:

- What are the risk factors but also the resources and skills connected with migrant motherhood, in particular for a woman of Arab origin?
- What orientating criteria emerge for the development of initiatives to support parenting in migration?

Maternity is an extremely delicate moment in the life of each woman, but especially in that of a migrant woman (Moro, 2002). Migration is a traumatic event; motherhood while living the trauma of migration becomes a moment of distinct vulnerability, with the "cultural transparency" compounding the psychic transparency.

Ethnopsychanalyst Moro's theories help us understand the risk factors associated with migrant motherhood, but it is also important to emphasise the protection factors and the resilience and educational skills that motherhood can bring to Arab migrant women.

The experience of motherhood is, for Arab women, a decisive event that marks social recognition and the legitimate transition to adulthood. In migration, this event maintains its importance: it adds meaning to a migration project that has often been cultivated precisely from the idea of creating a family or of securing it a future. At the same time, it provokes disorientation (Giacalone, 2013). Her emotional world is complex: she feels lonely, far from her family of origin, disorientated, guilty, but also a sense of satisfaction for the ongoing

project, and hope for her children's futures. Along these lines, motherhood can be interpreted as an experience that gives meaning to both the journey and daily efforts.

Representations related to motherhood in Arab women have historically been influenced by cultural systems, such as colonialism, political Islam, and Arab nationalism. Colonialist projects were justified by the mission of liberating Arab women. This mission pushed to identify and align Arab motherhood with the European equivalent. With the emergence of nationalist movements, criticism of colonial domination grew: it was deemed necessary to resist assimilation; native customs were to be rekindled. There were two options: those on one hand who preferred to avoid any change in women's conditions, and on the other those who believed in a project of general regeneration of Arab societies and hence changes in women's conditions – but in ways seen as culturally acceptable and not responding to explicit feminist demands.

Even today, Arab women continue to negotiate between modernity and tradition, seeking their own cultural identity, both as women and as mothers. Being a mother doesn't necessarily conflict with studies and work, like being a Muslim does not necessarily mean being relegated to stay at home. Indeed, education and a good profession can amply contribute to the development of the educational skills of a good Muslim mother (Davies & Papadopoulos, 2006).

For migrant women, this task becomes even more delicate, because the confrontation between the culture of origin and the culture of the destination country can complicate, sometimes dramatically, this passage: it is extremely demanding to reconcile tradition and modernity; identify as a woman and as a mother without the fear of betraying one's own culture of origin, by adhering to a new one (Cattaneo & dal Verme, 2005, 93).

So, the hypothesis is that maintaining links with the culture of origin and simultaneously incorporating elements from the new one; creatively rethinking the representation connected with motherhood within the original culture following the confrontation with the new one could be the preconditions in order to make this experience become a moment of reconciliation with one's own ghosts deriving from the country of origin, and also the beginning of a process of negotiation between educational models and multiple identities, which can be positive for the well-being of both mother and child.

Methods and methodology

The methodological paradigm of this study is that of the qualitative research (Denzin & Lincoln, 2005). In particular, an ethnographic approach (Gobbo, 2007, 2011, Ogbu, 1981) is adopted. Biographical interviews (Schütze, 2007; Schütze & Schröder-Wildhagen, 2012) are used too as instruments to collect life stories and suggestions coming from Grounded Theory (Glaser & Strauss, 1967; Strauss & Corbin, 1998; Tarozzi, 2008) are taken into account in the analysis of the collected material.

The usefulness of this approach

An increasingly complex world presents itself in front of the contemporary human being and researcher's life experiences and the cognitive journey.

Ethnography is useful in understanding the complexity of the contemporary world and in reacting to the current challenges which face pedagogy, since it is a particularly effective perspective from where to try to understand the processes of social transformation in place and what they entail in terms of «educational meanings and projects» (Gobbo, 2007, 5).

The contradictions and nuances that characterize contemporary social reality and, in particular, the educational one could pose dilemmas to the researcher from other research perspectives which are difficult to solve. From the point of view of the ethnographer, they constitute the specific material itself of their cognitive effort, which is directed towards an analysis that is able to «grasp the nuances, the richness and the multiplicity of reality» (Galloni, 2007, 23).

Another important feature of the ethnographic approach used in educational research concerns the dimension of the encounter with otherness. The anthropologist is guided by the purpose of understanding the other striving, however, not to bring them back to their own conceptual categories. In doing so, a delicate work comes into play of managing the relationship with their informants, constructed by negotiating roles, recognitions and meanings. It is a relationship which is nurtured from the moment of access to the field, gradually becoming more intimate, based on a relational attitude characterized by dialogue, negotiation, cultural decentralization and a “mixed logic” (Fabietti, Matera, & Malighetti, 2012).

Research as a form of education

The methodological choices made reflect both the indications developed in the educational field in relation to approaches that give voice to the insiders, in particular to migrants (De Souza, 2004), and the indications of method developed in the tradition of dialogic anthropology (Clifford & Marcus, 1986). This is a way of doing research with both political and formative effects. Political because it offers a gateway in order to give a voice to women who usually have “little voice” in the institutional contexts of the host countries. Formative: the researcher's questions not only lead the subjects to reflect on themselves (Galloni, 2007), but they stimulate the agency of the protagonists by encouraging them to reconnect with their own representational world and to activate their resources and skills.

Reflecting on their own experiences, narrating their life stories, daily efforts, and aspirations can help the women to reconnect with the symbolic world from their country of origin, weakened by migration, to re-evaluate their capabilities while re-discovering educational and resilience skills useful for the wellbeing and integration of both mothers and children.

The research

After an initial exploratory phase, I decided to focus on two main contact channels: two associations that work with migrant mothers in high density migrant populations areas and personal contacts.

These two associations, Mamme a Scuola (www.mammeascuola.it) and La Scuola delle Mamme (www.cespi-ong.org), offer Italian courses for immigrant mothers and, at the same time, set up children's play areas for children 0-3. Through the Italian courses they attract many women who want to learn the language, but their objectives are far more ample: creating a welcoming environment that can support the parenting experience and integration of mothers in the host country.

Through personal contacts, I attempted to reach women outside associative networks, living in other areas of Milan and beyond.

I met, spent time, shared moments, ideas, and experiences with women through the ethnographic method. I also interviewed 16 of them basing myself on a type of interview which concentrates first on the biographical side and then assumes a semi-structured style.

Preliminary results

Self-narration. Although I was cultivating an ethnographic relationship with many of the women I interviewed, I often encountered teething problems when asking them to tell their own story; to open themselves up during the interview. In particular, the initial biographical part of the interview caused several women to enter into a disorientated state, leaving them asking for more specific questions or alternatively exhausting their life story in just two words.

For example, I got to know Arianna (all names are pseudonyms) (Morocco) through Mamme a Scuola and after having built up our relationship for over a year. I'd dearly hoped that Arianna would have naturally opened up during the interview. Instead, we started the part of biographical interview that ended abruptly:

--A -- I am a Moroccan woman, I am 35 years old, I have been married for 7 years. I have two children: the first is 4 years old, the young girl is one year and nine months old. I live in Milan with my husband and I go to school at Mamme a Scuola to learn Italian. I like the experience of living in Italy because it is a good experience, people are good with me, with the teachers in my son's preschool there are no problems. (13.04.18)

Her words reminded me of the self-presentation method memorized during the Italian course, without a real willingness to get involved in a deep self-narration.

But, later, as the interview progressed, in particular with the semi-structured part, the questions provided an opportunity for the women to reflect on themselves and their own

experiences, allowing them to gradually reach a level of profoundness unexpected given the initial responses. Many women I interviewed came to Italy for family reunification reasons, experiencing migration as something forced upon them rather than chosen, desired, or driven by strong reasons. They clearly hadn't had many opportunities to elaborate their own experience, and my questions prompted them to reflect and find words not only to describe their story, but also elaborate it.

When I start the interview with Sabrina (Morocco), it seems that she is someone without any noticeable troubles. But after a while she burst into tears: it seemed like a barrier had been broken, allowing her to face the existential nodes that sit behind her suffering.

--AM-- Breathe... drink some water (...) Do you feel like going on?

--S—Yes, yes, it'll do me good so I can let off steam! (19.04.18)

Here that formative dimension of my research is explicit. Not just self-narration, it is made stronger thanks to the dialogue with a person who is Italian. This is a real exercise of “intercultural conversation” (Gobbo, 2007b), within which the researcher exercises an attitude based on active listening and cultural decentralization, but which also stimulates confrontation and exchange: presuppositions for an effective integration into the society in which she is landing into.

Below is an example of a conversation between myself and R. (Egypt). She is extremely worried about being able to build a life in her new country and to learn Italian. In this excerpt, she fires off a number of questions to understand how I lived in Egypt and learnt the Arabic language during a previous fieldwork in Egypt:

--R-- But how did you learn Arabic so well? (...) How long have you been in Egypt? (...) Ah, did you study Arabic at the university? (...) And why did you study Arabic? (...) And who was with you at the university? (...) And were the others Egyptian? (...) And when you went to Egypt were you alone?” (04.05.17)

It is similar to a process of mirroring between her and me: my experience in Egypt reminds her of hers in Italy, being alone, difficulties with a new language. But it also gives her the hope of being able to make it: a language can be learned, new relationships can be built, but you can also meet people who might understand you because they have lived an experience similar to yours. Through our encounter, R. reflects on herself and her own migration experience, discovering resources that could help her face the difficult path of integration in the host country.

Relationship with children. For Arab women, motherhood is a fundamental part of life. Being alone and dealing with the parental experience in the arrival country is difficult, generates insecurity, a sense of loneliness and fear, but at the same time children often become not only

the scope of the trip, but also of life: devoting yourself to them could push you towards facing the difficulties of daily life.

Silvia (Egypt), for example, married a man who had already emigrated to Italy and for the first few years she remained in Egypt with her children, while her husband was living in Italy. Then she decided to join her husband because she wanted her children to grow up close to their father. Silvia studied social services at university so was clear in her mind an educational project for her children (which in other cases remains more implicit): children must grow with the presence of both parents. This strong educational motivation drives and supports Silvia in her decision to migrate:

--S-- I got bored, I saw that the children were growing up without their father, they were missing him. I talked to him, I convinced him. "The children need you. You're tired and we've got tired too. They really need a father figure at home." (24.04.18)

The same thing happened again, during everyday difficulties, like the one they faced when they lost their home:

--AM-- Have you always been living there or did you change home?

--S-- No, before we were living near the school, we had a regular lease, but when the contract ended, the owner told us that she would not renew the contract because she had sold the house. So from one day to the other we found ourselves without a home. We turned to the council, which helped us. They hosted us for few days while my husband was looking for a new flat. (...) We were initially in a hotel and then in a type of temporary house.

--AM-- All together in any case?

--S-- Yes, all together. For me and my children it was free, while my husband had to pay. We are here to live together, then they wanted to separate us: it's not good. That's why he stayed with us. (24.04.18)

Relation with educational and school institutions. The entry of children into Italian educational and school services marks the first contact with the host country for many Arab mothers and a first occasion for socializing.

In recent research, it emerged that for many foreign parents, and especially for mothers, a child's admission to school and pre-school is an opportunity for empowerment, and a way out from the social and cultural isolation that often characterizes the first years of any migration experience. Taking care of children, interacting in the public space that educational institutions offer, and interacting with other parents and teachers are important occasions for immigrant mothers to build a new social network (Maher, 2012).

The teacher-parent relationship, when meeting with families of foreign origin, is more problematic because it fits into the wider issues of the confrontation between cultural groups, individuals in continuous movement and of different cultural and educational models.

At the same time, however, meetings between teachers and parents can be transformed into a reciprocal exchange of information and intercultural enrichment.

For many of my interviewees, housewives with a limited number of relationships outside the domestic context, entry into the educational world marked an important juncture in their lives in Italy: legitimated in going out of their homes and interacting with teachers and others parents thanks to their role as mothers, they start to penetrate the external context - and build their first social relationships.

Barbara (Morocco), for example, has been at home for three years and only when her children started to go to preschool did she too go out and get to know other people:

--B—when my children were born I started to go out alone a bit... Actually not when they were born, when at that point I had been [in Italy] for three years, but when they were here at preschool. It was in that moment that I started to go out alone, to go to Italian language school, to do everything... well, many things, not everything. (14.05.18)

The experiences with educational services reported to me are varied, from the most negative to the - many – positive ones, but invariably linked to the specific relationships and initiatives of the teacher rather than from an intentional, institutional design which aims to achieve an intercultural education.

Although foreign children and families are a constituent part of the population of contemporary educational institutions, it is still difficult to see it as «a professional event of today and tomorrow, which requires lasting and far-sighted -no longer avoidable- responses» (Favaro, 2013, 38), on the basis of which educational institutions should intentionally rethink themselves and their educational projects, objectives and strategies.

Social network. Many of my interlocutors spoke to me of the strong sense of loneliness felt, particularly in the immediate period following their arrival in Italy: the lack of extended family, the absence of husbands engaged with work, no external social relationships.

For some of them, loneliness and having to deal themselves with everyday difficulties, made them clam up towards others over time: although they interweave various relationships with both compatriots and Italians, they state that they do not trust anyone when they have a problem. They rely solely on their own strength.

Silvia, for example, does not talk to anyone when there is a problem, she only counts on her husband:

--AM-- When you have a problem, something you would like to talk about, do you have people you trust, with whom you can talk?

--S-- I have nobody to refer to or talk to. I only have my husband and he only has me.

--AM-- And people you consider friends?

--S-- Yes, there are, but I can't say that they are close friends. (24.04.18).

Against isolation, closure, other women report a different experience, linked to “resilience tutors” that helped them overcome initial difficulties and start a process of knowledge and integration in the Italian context and social reality through the mediation protected by trusted Italian people. These sometimes neighbors, often old people, other times teachers/educators or representatives of associations with whom they came into contact.

Ilaria has built a close relationship with a neighbor:

--A-- Are there Italian neighbors?

--I-- Yes, there is a lady, her name is Lucia, she lives near my house, a very sweet person. (...) She was the first person to enter my house and she was continuing to speak to me in Italian. At first I did not understand but she continued until I started to understand her.

[Later, Ilenia, Ilaria's 2-year-old daughter, intervenes during the interview]

--Il-- Lucia!

--I-- What do you want?

--Il-- Lucia!

--I-- Lucia? Now let's go to Lucia! (turning to me) She asked to go to Lucia, my neighbor. She really likes Lucia, even Laura [the other daughter]. “Mom, I want to go to Lucia!” “Now Lucia is sleeping” “No, I want to go!”

--AM-- And do they go to her home?

--I-- Yes, yes. (11.04.18)

Anna has kept in touch with the nursery teacher of her 10-year-old son. She considers her as a point of reference on issues related to education and childcare:

--AM-- And in kindergarten how did he [her son] feel?

--A-- In kindergarten, in fact ... The teachers told me that he would be very, very good. He was very active even in kindergarten, the teacher said that he was running all the time alongside cars. “He drives me crazy!”. They told me that he is very smart, that he speaks Italian better than the whole class, he pronounces well, he learns very fast. They told me he

would be very good at school, very smart. Then the kindergarten teacher sometimes sends me a message and asks me about him.

--AM-- Ah, you remained in good relationship?

--A-- Yes, a teacher who was very good and a friend. She retired last year. Sometimes she sends me a message to ask me about him. (...) This teacher was very smart, she knew how to treat every child according to their personality: a shy child, an active child...

(...)

She sent me a message to ask how I was, how the children were, I told her there was a problem and I went to her. Because she was a teacher, then she worked in the nursery office. I went to talk to her in person. (...) She gave me advice before anyone else. (2.05.18).

Conclusions

These are first reflections taken from the material collected during a still on-going empirical research. They highlight how different aspects related to parenting can constitute for migrant women of Arab origin possible causes of vulnerability. But these may also later turn into protective factors.

So, becoming mothers during migration can be a source of insecurity, fear, and bring about a sense of loneliness. But it can also prove a stimulus to face the journey and the adversity that lies in wait. In the same way, isolation can lead to one shutting down, but by encountering resilience tutors can help them to open up to others and face a new life context in front of them. Finally, admission into educational institutions can lead to contacts that help give rise to a dialogue and intercultural exchange, provided that these services are correctly geared towards a real intercultural education.

These first results show, therefore, how parenting in migrant women of Arab origin, if adequately supported, can contribute to the development of educational and resilience skills able to support the integration process and, consequently, the well-being of the whole family. The indications from here for teachers and operators who are in contact with Arab mothers are based on the same methods that the research was carried out with:

- recognition of the resources available to mothers and the legitimacy of different parenting methods;
- recognition of cultural and educational diversity but also promotion of negotiations and hybridizations;
- enhancement of narration, dialogue and intercultural meetings as qualities of a relational posture but also as practices with formative implications.

In conclusion, it is hypothesized that a parental support initiative will be developed together with educators and/or teachers, specifically targeting mothers of Arab origin. This would serve as a laboratory for experimentation of the pedagogical indications that emerged during the research.

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