

Migration and Integration

Changing Perceptions of Europe from Without to Within – A Case for Migrant Women

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ABSTRACT

This document presents some of the results collected from research conducted on migration into the EU as part of the EuroBroadMap project. This document analyses how migrants' perceptions of Europe change from the pre-migration stage to their arrival and settlement within the EU. The negative perception established migrants and asylum seekers hold of the EU, is largely due to the restrictions imposed, by individual states and the Union as a whole, on integration. Many of the problems related to the inability to integrate are largely due to discrepancies in state policies and the Dublin Convention. As a result, the inability of asylum seekers to reunite with their families does not allow them to envision a life locally. Furthermore, the definitions of family continue to be marred by gender biases, which relegate women to a lower social level and limits their agency and their ability to participate equally in local social activities. Thus, migrants' perception of the EU challenges the very values the EU claims to espouse.

Keywords: Migration, Integration, Family, Women, Perception, Dublin Convention

Introduction and Research Methodology

The research conducted dealt with five main groups of migrants: Somali asylum seekers in Malta (mainly women), potential Malian migrants in Bamako, Argentineans hoping to 'return' to Spain and Europe, Moldovan illegal immigrants in Romania, Indian migrants settled in Italy. The teams involved in this research all have some experience in the use of socio-anthropological methods of research. Asylum seekers, migrants and illegal immigrants were met and interviewed at various locations and areas of sociability, such as cultural centres and plazas, as well as detention centres, squats, homes and immigration offices. Apart from surveys the methods employed included: informal discussions, nondirective talk and *in situ* observation. Interaction through participation was also utilised through workshops organised later on in the project. The aim was to collect a series of narratives that shed light on the central questions to the research and project as a whole. Many of these queries focused on perception, migrant trajectories and objectives. The present paper looks more specifically at some of the common issues faced by women migrants entering, on the fringes, or already in Europe.

Perceptions of Europe Prior to Migration: Family and Citizenship

The research conducted with potential migrants in Mali and Argentina, provides insight into the perceptions of Europe prior to departure and their expectations upon arrival. It was established that in many cases migrants choose to believe the success stories that construct Europe as multicultural. Networks established in European countries by potential migrants' predecessors facilitate the possibilities for success. In Mali the youth testify that they are nobodies, and lavish food, commodities and technological gadgets construct their image of Europe.¹ In the interviews conducted in Mali with youths preparing to leave for Europe, city dwellers conceive Europe as a place where equality between men and women is encouraged, a situation which they believe is the opposite in their own country. Furthermore, women who did not graduate from secondary school believe that there are opportunities for employment in Europe that are unavailable in Mali. However, women tend to criticise the European idea of the family and the cultural beliefs that accompany it. The contention is that there is a culture of individualism that is driven by above all the drive to make money. Consequently, the men associate the trip to Europe with the possibility to explore their sexuality beyond the constraints of the family.

In the case of Argentineans preparing to leave for Europe, family memories play a central role in arguing for the legitimacy of their departure and their being considered citizens of European countries.

A shared ancestry and historical background constitute the basis for this claim. Often the collective narrative of blood spilled in the name of freedom and shared suffering provides a link between their 'European bloodline' that links Argentineans to Spain and Italy, and the blood their ancestors spilled in the struggle for the nation. It is worth noting that even though prospective migrants mobilise the argument of shared ancestry, the interviews conducted indicate that many of these prospective migrants want to move to Europe to escape family domination and in so doing "become oneself". In light of the shared ancestry with Europeans, they feel it is legitimate for them to benefit from favouritism over other migrants.

It is clear from the responses to the interviews conducted that Europe is perceived as an area offering security in its broadest sense and possibilities for upward social mobility. However, whereas the notion of the European family is criticised by women in Mali for its promotion of individualism, Argentineans utilise the family link with Europe to escape family domination in their own country in favour of the individualism provided by Europe. This is very much the case with Malian men who view the voyage as a possibility to escape the constraints of the family.² However, the difficulties associated with family reunification and the failure to achieve the latter is in many cases interpreted by Malians as a form of violence that especially targets women. Thus, the case of family reunification and immigration is highly gendered.

Perceptions of Europe for established migrants / migrants in Transit: Family and Integration

For asylum seekers the arrival in Europe does not signify an end to their troubles. The most significant difficulties they face are the experience of detention and the legal obstacles in reuniting with their families. Somali women in Malta are confronted with the virtual impossibility of reuniting with their families, and thus, of imagining a future locally. Most Somali women interviewed view Malta as a safe haven, especially in comparison to the difficulties and violence experienced throughout their trajectories however, they are subject to a different form of violence, of being kept suspended, without any structure provided for integration and without the possibility to leave Malta as a result of the Dublin convention. Furthermore, women staying at the family centre in Malta are not permitted visits from other men without the authorization of their husbands, and marriages carried out in Malta between immigrants are in many cases not recognised as valid by the open centre managers (immigrants may have been previously married and no legal separation would have been registered). However, there have also been a number of reports where 'failed' asylum applicants have been refused the issue of banns, allegedly for failure to produce a birth certificate, a process which is a breach of their fundamental right to marry.³

The problem of integration is not isolated to Malta. Indian women in Italy find that they enjoyed more freedom in India, as a result of women's networks and local familiarity. Their marginalisation by Italians brings out concerns of safety in a community that remains unfamiliar and distant to them. This community isolation, the inability to return to India because of lack of resources and legislation that further restricts family reunification and adds to the "weight of patriarchy".⁴ The control over access to the European space is firmly embedded in the contradictory European migratory policies, and the equally contradictory definitions of the 'European family' and the 'migrant family', that specifically target women. While European men and women are recognised as legally possessing a somewhat equal amount of agency and autonomy, EU immigration law enforces the idea of the man as the breadwinner and the woman as the dependant, facilitating the possibilities for abuse of immigrant women by locals and immigrant men alike.

Marriage and the Family: Constructing the Immigrant Woman

With respect to immigration law, the marriage laws of a country, which are central when differentiating between indigenous and immigrant communities, discriminate against a large percentage of immigrant women, who as a result are dependent on their spouses' legal status. This places immigrant women in a vulnerable position that may easily be exploited by immigrant men (Lutz 1997)⁵. The latter means that women are not recognised as being independent of men. This leads to the construction of an image of migrant women workers as unable to be productive or independent, and propagates the image of migrant women as passive victims, denying them agency. In the case of Somali immigrant women in Malta, it denies their ability / potential to embark on the harrowing journey across sub-

Saharan Africa independent of men, and works under the assumption that they are passive pillions throughout their trajectory.

The reasons for migration for Somali women (aside from the threat of civil war, violence and gender-based abuse) are very much centred on the family, although they leave their children and family behind, they do so with the aim of making enough money to send back to them, and eventually apply for family reunification (this is not available for those with subsidiary protection in the case of Malta). Mothers see themselves as selflessly taking on the difficulties of migration, whether legal or not, to support their children. In the case of Somali women in Malta there was also a case of 'love migration' with one of the women interviewed having escaped Somalia to be able to marry the man she loved, against the wishes of both their fathers. This is significant in that it illustrates the extent to which migration may give both women and men more autonomy and allow them to act in ways and take decisions that would not otherwise be possible. Yet, this situation also underlines the continuity in terms of social restrictions between Somalia and Malta, where immigrant marriages in Malta are not recognised as valid (if they do not produce a valid document of identification from their home country, which is virtually impossible in the cases of those immigrants coming from countries plagued by war and civil strife). Immigrants are denied residence, identity and stability in both contexts through the restrictions placed on the establishment of a family and the self-determination that accompanies this.

"The struggle for control of kinship – residence, marriage, childcare, sex, intimacy, inheritance, generational obligations – (in its most encompassing anthropological sense), also involves redefining social reproduction" (Strathern 1992 cited in Borneman and Fowler 1997: 494)⁶. This control serves as a limiting factor in the case of integration, and controls not only the way in which the local community is structured in terms of socio-political and economic relations, but also controls the factors that may influence it and indeed change it. Thus, in many cases marriages are not recognised as valid, as with Somali immigrants in Malta⁷, while family reunifications are also subject to a fleet of restrictions. In this case the control of kinship relations, in which women are at the core, is a control of the level of impact and the social imprint migrants have or may have on a community.

With regards to immigration law in Europe, marriage is being used as the 'gatekeeper' to fortress Europe. In this respect European immigration law enforces the idea of the man as the breadwinner and upholds the conception of the nuclear family pattern, which is constituted by the husband, his wife and their children, such that the immigrant woman loses all rights and access to citizenship in the absence of a 'recognised' partnership. In this way European immigration law not only heightens the inequalities between immigrant and host-state men and women, but further enforces the belief that immigrant populations are embedded in traditional structures, whereas the European men and women are shedding the bonds of old-fashioned lifestyles, creating a diametric opposition in consciousness, especially with regards to a space of belonging (Lutz 1997).

Changing Perceptions: What Appears to Be and What Is

Migrants' changing perception of Europe is intrinsically linked to the failure to integrate, a process made ever more difficult by European and individual states' contradictory immigration and asylum policies, in particular the Dublin convention. The inability to integrate allows 'us' to justify the classification of migrants, especially 'black migrants', as the 'other'. The issue of integration is inseparably linked to the notion of the family, as Somali immigrant women have emphasised during interviews; the restrictions connected to family reunification make it impossible for them to envision "a life project locally".

European Asylum policy and its local application has presented itself as the biggest obstacle to integration and contradicts the very values that the EU claims to uphold.⁸ It also arrives at a number of fleeting assumptions regarding the contextual background of asylum seekers, lumping them under a single category and denying the existence of different needs according to each asylum seeker's background context, which proves to be a further inhibition to the process of integration. By stating that asylum seekers must lodge their request for asylum in the first EU country in which they arrive, the Dublin convention is restricting the movement of asylum seekers to the border countries of the EU, further justifying the notion of 'fortress Europe'. The concentration of asylum seekers in border countries has furthermore led to an increase in instances of racism and xenophobia in these overwhelmed communities, further obstructing the process of integration. Asylum seekers may in many cases want to request asylum in a particular country where they may have family connections,

are more familiar with the language or where there is an established community of their co-nationals, all aspects that would facilitate their integration into that community.

The Dublin convention also assumes that equal justice will be provided in all member states, where in fact there are unequal recognition rates, periods of detention, access to employment opportunities and education, as well as differences in the definition of who a refugee is, the family, and what constitutes grounds for the granting of asylum. In many EU states the immigrant woman is treated as dependent, limiting her rights, agency and access to the labour market. The restrictive measures applied to family reunification, as well as the failure in some countries to recognise immigrant marriages, also affects immigrant women's agency and sustains powerful ambiguities. What appears to be a multicultural Europe based on equality, strong values and unity, is in fact a perception that is far from reflected in immigrants' actual experiences of Europe. Equality is extended to Europeans, but not beyond, which is reflected in the polarised definition of the family for Europeans and immigrants. The Dublin convention is regarded as "an integral aspect of the harmonisation of asylum policies in the EU"⁹, yet does not consider the varying definitions and migratory policies across each member state.

In order to facilitate migrants' integration, relieve the stress of EU border-states, eliminate gender bias and retain a positive perception of the EU that runs parallel to the values it espouses, there is a need to revise the Dublin convention as well as reframe the policy on integration, which would need to take into account the various political and social realities of each member state, and facilitate the settlement of asylum seekers in countries / communities, where the presence of family members, established co-national communities and a more accessible language enhances the possibilities for their successful integration. There is also a need for the harmonisation of EU asylum law with International human rights law, whilst ensuring that individual states are able to comply with a set of standards that ensures respect for asylum seekers' and 'failed' asylum seekers' basic human rights, including the right to marry and set up a family. In so doing there is a need to formulate a definition of the family that is free from gender-bias and does not continue to portray women as 'dependents', thereby limiting their agency.

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