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# IMMIGRANTS FROM CABO VERDE IN ITALY: HISTORY AND PATHS OF SOCIO-EDUCATIVE INTEGRATION

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## Abstract

Cape Verdean migration to Italy started in the early sixties of the nineteenth century as an exclusively female one, mostly caused by the demand for domestic workers by bourgeois families. In the late eighties, the Cape Verdean community migrated to Italy was still composed of more than 90% of women. In 1990, the introduction of a legislation setting forth the right to family reunification allowed many women to reunite with their husbands and children remained in their homeland. In Italy, the gradual social inclusion process and the creation of a network of Cape Verdean migrants' association, allowed to overcome all those problems that troubled the first migrants arrived in Italy. Even though the integration process sets a context generally positive, there are still many problems,

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specially linked to job insecurity – also caused by the low social and professional mobility – and children’s education. Families are often divided, and mother have to raise children alone, often living with their employer. The increasing presence of Italian-born children of immigrants, simultaneously to the ‘building’ of second and third generations, have hastened the process of cultural and social hybridization, however, without weaken Italian-CapoVerdeans’ ‘Capo-Verdeanity’ strong sense of social and cultural identity.

### Keywords

Cape Verdean migration, Women, Cultural integration, Cabo Verde, Labor.

## 1. Cabo Verdeans in Italy: phases and timing of a mostly female phenomenon

Women were the real pioneers of migration to Italy, which started during the mid-sixties when alongside the phenomenon of emigration, which had involved Italian society since the nineteenth century, there began the reverse migration that is still in progress (Demetrio, Favaro, Melotti, Zigliio, 1990; Vicarelli, 1994; de Filippo, 2000). The female component, which now accounts for more than half of the five million regular immigrants in Italy (IDOS Study and Research Centre, 2014), has been a significant slice of Italian immigration since the beginning.

In the specific case of Cabo Verdean migration to Italy, the phenomenon originated as an exclusively female emigration, encouraged by the demand for domestic workers to be employed in the homes of middle-class families in major Italian cities (Jesus, 1989). What was attracting women was the need for labour in the context of domestic work and child care, which emerged in the years of industrialisation that characterised Italy in the decades following the end of the Second World War. This had encouraged Italian women to abandon domestic work to be employed in factories (Silva, 2002, p. 46). Then the demand for care work involving people increased in the nineties to meet the increasingly urgent, social need for care of the no longer self-sufficient elderly, whose number is constantly growing because of increased longevity and aging of the population. Today in the field of care – where most of the so-called “caregivers” (*badanti*) are employed: this was a term introduced by the Italian legislation on immigration of 2002 – women of different countries and continents are involved, mainly from Eastern Europe, but initially concerned mostly Philippine, Eritrean and Cabo Verdean women (Silva, 2012a).

The Cabo Verdean immigration to Italy began sporadically as an exclusively female phenomenon between 1957 and 1962, but it soon took on a continuous nature. At first the goal was Rome; later the other major cities such as Turin, Milan, Genoa, Florence, Naples and Palermo became places of welcome and employment for Cabo Verdeans. The first to emigrate were the women from São Nicolau and acting as go-between were the Capuchin friars who had been on the island for a long time (Cabral, 2012). As soon as the Cabo Verdean women arrived in Italy, usually unmarried and with a basic education, they set about finding work for other fellow compatriots, both relatives and friends. This sparked a real chain of migration that linked Cabo Verde to Italy and that reached its highest peak in the late 1970s and early 1980s. Thus the function of the Capuchin friars gradually decreased in importance, giving way to a network of organised and legal migration in which women, also from this point of view, played a role as protagonists. From the second half of the 1960s the flow of Cabo Verdeans to Italy had in the meantime also affected all the other islands (Jesus, 1989).

Until 1970 employment contracts were regular, but since the contracts of domestic workers were not regulated, the rights and duties of such workers depended only on verbal agreements between them and their employers. With the collective contract for domestic workers (called “*colf*” from the Italian “*collaboratrici familiari*”) imposed in 1973 by the Ministry of Labour, labour relations were regulated by law, although in fact the Cabo Verdeans, like other foreign domestic workers, closed in the home, continued to work according to schedules that were too long, not to have holidays and to be underpaid. This situation of regularity might make it appear that the situation of the immigrants at that time was better than the current “care-givers”. In some ways it was, if you think that the way to emigrate to Italy is today almost exclusively that of illegality, with all the risks involved, as evidenced by the frequent shipwrecks off the Italian coast. However, even then the situation was not easy if one considers that at that time there was no check on the situation of domestic workers, whose rights were very limited and whose social security and trade union contributions were almost nonexistent.

Between 1970 and 1980 taking the route to Italy were not just very young unmarried girls, but also women and mothers who had left their children and often a husband or companion in Cabo Verde. The presence in Italy of other immigrants coming from various countries of Asia, Africa, Central and South America (Philippines, Eritrea, Sri Lanka, India, Dominican Republic, Peru etc.) over the years generated strong competition in working in the domestic sector, which discouraged departures from Cabo Verde. Fortunately,

at the same time the social, economic and cultural situation of Cabo Verde, after independence in 1975, was steadily improving (Bossu-Picat, 1985), so much so that emigration today is seen more as a forced departure, even though many young people continue to have the desire to emigrate.

In the late 1980s the Cabo Verdean community in Italy was made up, by more than 90%, of women. The issuing of comprehensive legislation on immigration, with law no. 39 of 1990, among other things, introduced the right to family reunification, thus allowing many Cabo Verdean women to be rejoined by their husbands and any children left at home or who had migrated to other countries, so as to constitute a family in Italy.

With the formation of families, Cabo Verdean emigration, just as in general in migration processes, came to lose those traits of provisional and temporary nature that had marked it early on, taking on instead a stable connotation (Silva, 2004). For the Cabo Verdeans Italy became no longer a land of passage in which to look for a certain economic fortune and then return home, but the place where you plan your own future. A new perspective that was certainly helped by many mixed marriages between Italians and Cabo Verdean women.

Whereas during the first phase of immigration, women returned to Cabo Verde after a few years of work (2-5) – often after contracting marriage with compatriots who had emigrated elsewhere in Europe – ensuring that new streams of young women would fill the places left free by those leaving – the stabilisation of Cabo Verdeans in Italy since the early 1990s has severely limited this turnover.

In 1972 there were between 3,500 and 4,000 Cabo Verdeans in Italy, of which about 2,500 from the island of São Nicolau. After reaching a peak in 1978, migration decreased sharply from 1981, following the introduction by the Italian government of more restrictive procedures regarding immigration from non-EU countries in the developing world, such as Cabo Verde. In the mid-1980s, when legal entries were almost totally blocked, Cabo Verdean immigrants resident in Italy numbered 7,000, 90% of whom were women (Altieri, 1992).

Starting from the 1990s we saw the first cases of repatriation or of emigration to other countries by the Cabo Verdeans living in Italy. Returning were especially those women who, having reached retirement age, preferred to return to their country of origin, where life is cheaper. At the same time internal mobility on the Italian territory, initially quite small, became much livelier.

Today the official figures indicate a presence, almost constant since 2009, of about 4,600 Cabo Verdeans legally resident in Italy (ISTAT data).

The number of people of Cabo Verdean origin on the Italian territory, however, is much higher, and hovers between 10 and 12 thousand people, since many women have gradually acquired Italian citizenship, through marriage to Italians, but also by naturalisation.

## **2. Work and social situation of Cabo Verdean immigrants in Italy**

It is estimated that 70% of immigrants from Cabo Verde in Italy are still working in domestic work. Poor labour mobility is due both to the rigidity of the Italian labour market and to the limited opportunities for immigrants in general to acquire new professional skills by attending specialised courses. Nevertheless, since the early 1980s, the Cabo Verdeans have begun to pursue other interests, especially in services and commercial and tourist structures.

For a large number of them, having a full-time housework job implies their total availability for their employers, or being available round the clock, except for one and a half days a week. This prevents them from engaging in any activity of study, work or relationship, which would allow an improvement in their living conditions.

Given the social stereotype for which a domestic worker must be female and given the low level of specialisation of male migrants from Cabo Verde, the latter have more difficulty in finding employment and therefore their rate of unemployment is higher than women's. However, over time some men have adapted to the work of care, possibly working in pairs with their companions. Then the fact that Cabo Verdean adults of first generation migrated to Italy as part of family reunification led in some cases to a certain disorientation and a sense of inadequacy when the men found themselves facing situations already overcome by their companions.

The scarcity of leisure time related to domestic work has not prevented a number of Cabo Verdean immigrants from increasing their level of education. There was, especially with the first to arrive, an important need for training, which was met by setting up a Portuguese School in Rome in 1971. The curriculum was based on the official programmes in force in Portugal and that included early primary education and the preparatory cycle and later extended its classes until the 12th year of schooling. For many years the students of this school were mostly of Cabo Verdean origin and only in the middle of the 1990s did enrolments decrease substantially.

Another important dimension that has always characterised and continues to characterise the social and cultural life of many Cabo Verdeans

living in Italy is associative (Jesus, 1996). Currently there are Cabo Verdean associations in Rome, Milan, Naples, Florence, Genoa and Palermo. In Rome as early as the mid-1970s there was an association, founded by two Cabo Verdeans originating from São Vicente, who over more than ten years favoured the maintenance of social ties and mutual support among people who were likely to lose themselves in society, supporting their desire for education and training. This association later gave way to a new association, the *Organização das Mulheres Caboverdianas em Italia* (OMCVI), set up in 1988 and still active in various fields, including those of promoting Cabo Verdean culture and maintaining important ties with Cabo Verde. The subsequent emergence of other Cabo Verdean associations in Rome is a sign of great vitality and organisational ability of the Cabo Verdean community in Italy (Jesus, 1989).

Belonging to the Catholic religion has certainly encouraged the relationship between immigrants from Cabo Verde and the local community. The fact that the religion practiced by the Cabo Verdeans is the same as practiced by the autochthonous population facilitated reception of the former, because the Catholic Church is driven by the concern to keep religion alive in them (Monteiro, 1997). Especially in the first phase religious bodies made premises available to the Cabo Verdeans and people responsible for their hospitality during the time left free from work. In Rome a particularly significant role was played by the centre "*Tra Noi*" (Among Us), which set up a meeting place for Cabo Verdean girls. In Naples the Don Orione Institute welcomed and continues to welcome women with children laid off by employers who do not accept the presence of the children of workers or who expect them to send their children to Cabo Verde after their birth.

The gradual integration of women in local society and the lack of free time, gradually more and more absorbed by emotional commitments and family life, has however, weakened ties with religious institutions, somewhat unable to meet the new needs of women, less and less connected with the emergency of the first reception and orientation in the new context of life, and instead connected with the desire for positive integration into Italian society. Furthermore, making a comparison between the religious life conducted in Cabo Verde and that conducted in Italy, we are facing a transformation that we have defined elsewhere in terms of a change in the social and symbolic significance of religious practices. In other words, the social and symbolic significance of the different practices, such as marriage or christening, changes in the new context. In Cabo Verde the rites, as well as having an obviously strictly religious value, are also designed to strengthen the position and the social role of the individual within a network of local

relationships. In Italy, however, the fragility of the network of relationships established by the group and especially the marginalisation suffered by the group itself, prevent the establishment of meaningful relationships with the outside world, so that the same practices are emptied of the symbolic meaning and social importance that they hold in the country of origin. The influence of the cultural context of the country of immigration is then manifested clearly in appropriation of traditional customs of European societies, such as the custom of giving and receiving presents at ceremonies such as a christening, communion, confirmation etc. (Silva, 2000).

What is more, over the years the composition of the Cabo Verdean community in Italy has been transformed and diversified. César Augusto Monteiro, analysing the communities of immigrants from Cabo Verde in Rome, outlined three types: that of the “first generation”, formed by women who arrived in Italy in the 1960s, characterised by a low level of education and very connected to the traditional habits and customs of Cabo Verde; that of the “independence generation”, made up of women who came to Italy in the mid-1970s and mid-1980s, with a relatively higher level of education, a higher level of expectations and with a more conscious and determined migration project, emotionally linked to the first group, but able to deal with Italians on a level of greater equality; and finally the type that consists of the generations born in Cabo Verde or in Italy between 1980 and 1985.

These young people from immigrant families and who sociologists generally call second-generation immigrants - but today in Italy we are already in the presence of a third-generation of Cabo Verdeans descending from the first immigrants - have more self-respect compared to the groups of the first generation and, in any case, even though financially supported by their families, they have less planning ability and in many cases leave school and have conflicting attitudes towards their culture of origin (Monteiro, 1997, pp. 399-403).

### **3. Bringing up children of immigration: the case of Cabo Verdean mothers**

Parents today find it increasingly more difficult to be an important guide for their children in a society marked by a deep crisis of values and models. Disorientation, fear and anxiety, not only in parents, but in all the subjects who have the task of accompanying the growth of the younger generation, are the manifestations of this crisis. Then the multiplication of ways of forming a family or of living in a family is accompanied by a plurality of



educational styles and ways of relating to the family which in turn determines very diversified behaviour in children. For immigrant families raising children is a challenge, even more difficult for the reasons explained above because they live in the most vulnerable conditions due to issues of social integration and cultural adaptation. In order to succeed in their parenting tasks, immigrant parents must develop a different educational approach than the one in which they were educated because for their children to develop a secure identity they need to learn to combine the references and cultural values of their tradition with those of the country where they live. Psychological and cultural lacerations related to the migration experience accompanied by low self-reflexive skills do not always allow immigrant parents to respond appropriately to the educational challenges posed by today's society. In order to educate in immigration parents should reflect critically on the educational model in order to work out a new idea of education and their relationship with their children. Doing so can help them build the capacity to transit between various cultural backgrounds, thereby avoiding the creation in them of a state of dissonance between the values of the family culture and those of the society in which they live (Silva, 2012b).

In the case of Cabo Verdeans in Italy, the children, including those born in the country of immigration of the parents, live the migratory experience of their families as a reflex. At the end of the 1980s Maria de Lourdes Jesus already reported some difficulties faced by Cabo Verdean women in raising and keeping their children born in Italy with them, as well as the inability to transmit the linguistic and cultural elements of their country of origin to them (cf. Jesus, 1989, p. 88).

It should also be noted that having children is not always a rational choice, for immigrants, but perhaps not only for them. In the specific case of the Cabo Verdean women that choice may be motivated by a desire to have their own emotional life and family.

Having children in the working, economic and housing situation described above can cause great difficulty in rearing and educating them. Especially when it is only the mother who is taking responsibility, as in the case of many Cabo Verdeans. Raising children alone, without the material and emotional support of a companion, not only depends on the separation imposed by the experience of migration, but in this case also has roots in cultural patterns and relationships between men and women typical of Cabo Verdean society, where a significant proportion of men live parenting irresponsibly by refusing to deal with all or part of the care and education of children (Filho, 1995).

In the case of Cabo Verdean immigrants in Italy, but this also applies to other immigrant women employed in fixed household collaboration, new

mothers are forced to send their newborn children to relatives in the country of origin and then take them back at school age (normally at 6 years old). Indeed, these women cannot count, like the autochthonous women, on a network of relatives who can support them in taking care of young children while they are at work. This is a problem that in a country like Italy, where childcare services are still insufficient (especially in the southern regions of the country), really affects immigrant families with young children and especially single-parent ones.

Yet another difficulty is that relating to transmission of the language and culture of Cabo Verde. In many cases, the teachers themselves discourage parents from cultivating the language of origin considering that it might be an obstacle to learning Italian for pupils. In others the total and prolonged immersion in the Italian-speaking context, which is accompanied by scarce and sporadic contacts with compatriots, means that the mother may exclusively use the Italian language even in the family, especially in the case of mixed marriages.

When the difficulties of social and cultural inclusion are particularly severe for mothers, children tend to develop a distancing from the cultural context of origin, believing that their origin is the cause of their difficulties. It is especially in adolescence that the problems of identity are more obvious, that is when the search for one's own identity becomes urgent and there is a risk for the adolescent of not finding answers to his/her questions and of falling into a kind of suspension between two worlds. Although as shown in a study conducted in Rome on a group of teenagers from Cabo Verde, they remain anchored to the values and models transferred by families – particularly their traditional idea of family – even with them you notice uncertainty and fragility in comparison with the culture of the majority. A strong need for recognition of their ethnic specificity by society emerges in young people; a recognition that would allow them to earn greater self-esteem (Santos Fermin, 2008). The recovery of the cultural traits of Cabo Verdeans in a creative *métissage* by the second generation – as in the case of music and literature – should be seen as a message to Italian society, still too closed to the symbolic and existential world of the new citizens.

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