

TENSIONS BETWEEN MULTICULTURALISM AND WOMEN'S RIGHTS IN THE EXPERIENCE OF WOMEN'S INTERCULTURAL ASSOCIATIONS IN ITALY

TENSIONES ENTRE MULTICULTURALISMO Y DERECHOS DE LAS MUJERES EN LA EXPERIENCIA DE LAS ASOCIACIONES INTERCULTURALES DE LAS MUJERES EN ITALIA

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RESUMEN

Una parte de la teoría liberal feminista ha identificado que el multiculturalismo está en oposición a los derechos de las mujeres (Okin, 1999) y esas teorías pueden volverse aún más atractivas en los tiempos actuales de anti/post-multiculturalismo. Otros autores han abogado por la necesidad de distinguir entre multiculturalismo liberal y crítico o reflexivo (May y Sleeter, 2010). Este artículo analiza la tensión entre el multiculturalismo y los derechos de las mujeres dentro de las asociaciones interculturales de mujeres en Italia. Investiga cómo estas organizaciones han abordado cuestiones que se toman como ejemplos de diferencias culturales, como las mutilaciones genitales femeninas y los matrimonios forzados. Su objetivo es responder a la pregunta: ¿en qué medida las asociaciones elegidas han podido evitar tanto la "Escila del fundamentalismo feminista como el Caribdis del relativismo cultural?" (Anthias, 2002), reuniendo así objetivos feministas y antirracistas. El artículo se basa en un estudio empírico realizado a través de entrevistas en profundidad y análisis documental.

PALABRAS CLAVE: multiculturalismo, migración, feminismo, antirracismo, activismo, Italia.

ABSTRACT

A part of feminist liberal theory has identified multiculturalism to be in opposition to women's rights (Okin, 1999) and those theories may become even more appealing in current times of anti/post-multiculturalism. Other authors have advocated for the necessity to distinguish between liberal and critical or reflexive multiculturalism (May and Sleeter, 2010). This article analyses the tension between multiculturalism and women's rights within women's intercultural associations in Italy. It investigates how these organisations have addressed issues which are taken as examples of cultural difference such as female genital mutilations and forced marriages. It aims to respond to the question: to what extent the chosen associations have been able to avoid both the "Scylla of feminist fundamentalism and the Charybdis of cultural relativism?" (Anthias, 2002), thus bringing together feminist and antiracist aims. The article is based on an empirical study carried out through in-depth interviews and documentary analysis.

KEYWORDS: multiculturalism, migration, feminism, antiracism, activism, Italy

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1. INTRODUCTION

After a brief theoretical overview, this article analyses the tension between multiculturalism and women's rights in the specific setting of women's intercultural associations bringing together, in the Italian context, migrant and Italian-born women with the aim of promoting feminist and antiracist aims. In particular, it analyses how these associations have addressed issues which are taken as examples of cultural difference such as female genital mutilations and forced marriages. The paper aims to respond to the question: to what extent the chosen associations have been able to reach a position which avoids both the "Scylla of feminist fundamentalism and the Charibdis of cultural relativism?" (Anthias, 2002). In other words, how is it possible to keep feminist and antiracist values together within a project based on a notion of feminist solidarity? (Bernacchi, 2018). The article is based on an empirical study carried out through in-depth interviews and documentary analysis of the documents, publications, websites produced by a number of selected women's intercultural associations in Italy.

2. THEORETICAL DEBATES AROUND MULTICULTURALISM AND WOMEN'S RIGHTS

In the common discourse examples of culture difference, such as Islamic veiling practices, forced marriages, female genital

mutilations (FGM), are often regarded as symbols of irreconcilable difference between Western and non-Western values. In such an approach gender is central as women are not only regarded as the biological reproducers of a nation, but those who perpetuate its cultural traditions (Yuval Davis, 1997). Oftentimes those which are regarded as different cultural traditions are defined in terms of gender relations and the control of women's behaviour is used in order to reproduce ethnic boundaries. Thus, mainstream discourse often opposes the concept of women's rights, regarded as mainly a Western value, with the idea of multiculturalism and those theories may become even more appealing in current times of anti/post-multiculturalism (Lentin and Titley, 2011; Ferrante, 2015).

Such an opposition was identified already twenty years ago by a part of feminist liberal theory. In particular Susan Moller Okin (1999) prompted a large debate on the issue, in her well known work 'Is multiculturalism bad for women?' whose terms are still important to be discussed today. Okin criticises multicultural policies for having a detrimental effect on women's lives based on the argument that most minority cultures are more patriarchal than western culture. Therefore, she argues that women belonging to such minorities have no interest in having their culture preserved. To support her argument, she cites a number of examples of what she terms 'cultur-

al practices', such as veiling, polygamy, clitoridectomy. Okin also questions the idea that the self-proclaimed leaders of a group - composed mainly of elderly male group members - might not represent the interests of all of a group's members. Okin's text is not new, however the terms of the discussion are still relevant today in relation to current debates about cultural diversity and as a framework of analysis for my research about women's intercultural associations in Italy.

A number of objections to Okin's argument have been raised by her respondents and in subsequent texts referring to the concept of culture and the risk of promoting racist attitudes towards minority populations. Among Okin's respondents Kathia Pollitt (1999) and Marta Nussbaum (1999) emphasise the overly-simplified description of cultures provided by Okin. Pollitt (1999) and Bhabba (1999) highlight that cultures are not static, lacking internal conflict, on the contrary they are constantly evolving. Such a point is addressed also by Benhabib (2002) who advocates against the idea that cultures are totalities that can be neatly described and that there is a clear correspondence between them and groups of the population. In contrast, she stresses the relevance of internal differences as well as power relations inside a given culture. This approach does not deny the importance of cultural differences, nor does it maintain that they are imaginary or unreal. However: "[...] any view of cul-

tures as clearly delineable wholes is a view from the outside that generates coherence for the purpose of understanding and controlling" (Benhabib, 2002: 5). On these bases, Benhabib opposes the idea of a "mosaic multiculturalism" which she defines as: "[...] the view that human groups and cultures are clearly delineated and identifiable entities that coexist, while maintaining firm boundaries, as would pieces of a mosaic" (Benhabib, 2002, p.8).

Similarly to Benhabib, Anne Phillips (2007) explains how "culture is not bounded" because people draw from a range of sources at different geographical levels, "cultures are not homogenous" as there is always some degree of internal contestation and finally "cultures are produced by people, rather than being things that explain why they behave the way they do" (p.45) and there is often some political interest in relation to the interpretation of culture which prevails. Bonnie Honig (1999) emphasises how putting a number of cultural practices such as veiling, polygamy and clitoridectomy on the same level without contextualising them, risks promoting racism and xenophobia towards migrant populations (Honig, 1999). Similarly, Anthias (2002) notes the presence in all cultures of practices that do not promote women's autonomy. She further states that: "[...] there can be no absolute consensus on these issues and they are emergent rather than given; women themselves need to engage

in much more dialogue around them” (Anthias, 2002, p.279). She also emphasises the contradictory way in which gender violence is addressed. Whereas in a Western context gender based violence against women is often seen as the result of individual pathological men, the violence suffered by migrant women is frequently regarded as a culturally motivated crime so that even if women are supported, a demonisation takes place of a group’s cultural tendencies which is the basis for justifying forms of surveillance and control in the home (Anthias, 2014). Again, Phillips notes with concern how the language of cultural traditions or culture practices is used almost exclusively in relation to non Western culture and she concludes that:

Culture is so thoroughly equated with minority or non-Western culture that it has become virtually redundant to preface it in this way. This is a deeply troubling equation. Because it makes the cultural specificities of people from majority groups less visible, it encourages them to treat their own local practices as if these were universal rules of conduct, spawning much indignation against newcomers, foreigners, or immigrants who fail to abide by the rules. (Phillips, 2007, pp.63-64)

In relation to the debate described above, it is important to recall that multiculturalism may be regarded as “a slippery and fluid term” (Lentin and Titley, 2011, p.2)

which lends itself to different understandings. On this point, the distinction operated by Anthias (2002) between liberal and critical or reflexive multiculturalism proves helpful. Anthias argues that liberal multiculturalism refers to policies enacted by States and agreed by the majority population that decides the terms for the participation of minorities (p.279). These policies are those most commonly criticised by feminist scholarship, including feminist post-colonial authors, because they regard culture as fixed and unchanging. They also prioritise communitarian culture over women’s rights. For instance, Yuval Davis, Anthias & Kofman criticise multicultural policies on the basis that:

Such constructions do not allow space for internal power conflicts and interest differences within the minority collectivity, for instance conflicts along the lines of class, gender, politics and culture. Moreover, they tend to assume collectivity boundaries, which are fixed, static, ahistorical and essentialist, with no space for growth and change. (Yuval Davis, Anthias & Kofman, 2005, p.523)

It is also argued that multiculturalism does not challenge the western hegemonic culture and that, on the contrary, it can have the effect of being divisive as it tends to underline the cultural differences between ethnic minorities, instead of the common experiences they have of racism, as well as social and econom-

ic exploitation (Yuval Davis, Anthias & Kofman, 2005). In contrast, according to its proponents, reflexive or critical multiculturalism (Rattansi, 1999; Parekh, 2000; Anthias, 2002; May and Sleeter, 2010; Modood, 2013) recognises the fluid and evolving nature of cultural identities as well as the possibility of hybrid identities. Moreover, “[...] rather than prioritizing culture, critical multiculturalism gives priority to structural analysis of unequal power relationships, analyzing the role of institutionalized inequities, including but not necessarily limited to racism” (May and Sleeter, 2010, p.10). As emphasised by Stokke and Lybæk (2018), critical multiculturalism is concerned with the lived experiences of minorities and with their own analyses of the oppression as well as the concrete political demands they raise (Modood, 2013). Critical multiculturalism also aims at analysing the way in which these social movements may produce a transformation of mainstream societies and how some of their demands are accommodated by the state. In conclusion, it can be said that while liberal multiculturalism takes a top-down perspective (based on the question ‘how can the state accommodate diversity’), critical multiculturalism has a bottom-up perspective of minorities and their social movements.

More recently, the debate initiated by Okin (1999), has been analysed within the wider context of femonationalism (Farris, 2017) and of the «righting of feminism» (Farris and Rottenberg, 2017)

referring, among others, to the appropriation of feminist ideals by right-wing parties with anti-migrant aims, the convergence between some feminists and right-wing groups as well as the merging of feminism with neo-liberalism. In particular, for the purpose of my research, it is important to note that in current times the critique to multiculturalism is being endorsed by nationalist parties based on the cooptation and appropriation of feminist values with anti-migrant aims. Such a phenomenon has defined by Farris (2017) as “femonationalism”. At the same time she also emphasises that by the term femonationalism she also refers to the involvement of some feminists in the stigmatization of Muslim men based on gender equality arguments.

In the following sections some example are provided of how the tensions between feminist and antiracist aims have been addressed within the specific setting of women’s intercultural associations in the Italian context.

3. THE ITALIAN MIGRATION CONTEXT

This section sets the framework of the Italian migration context with a specific focus on female migration. In contrast to other European countries with long immigration histories, such as the UK and France, but similarly to other southern European countries, Italy has witnessed significant immigration in more recent

times, starting from the early '90s. However, migration already began in the '70s, when specific groups of migrant women – mostly from the Philippines, Cape Verde, the Dominican Republic, Somalia, Eritrea, Sri Lanka and El Salvador – arrived in Italy to be employed as domestic workers in upper class families. During this period, migrant women remained largely invisible, as they were mostly employed as live-in domestics. As indicated in the Femipol report (Campani, 2007), during this first period of immigration to Italy, sometimes the female flows outnumbered the male ones. Statistics on female immigration to Italy point to the fact that between 1965 and 1990, the number of female immigrants increased by 63%, while the male one increased by 58%. During the '80s, women started to be employed in the daytime and no longer as live-in domestics, achieving a greater degree of independence and becoming more visible. During the '90s, a significant number of migrant women arrived in Italy for family reunification purposes, following new legislation on the matter. However, their insertion tended to be more difficult as they were more dependent on their husbands, including from the point of view of legal aspects linked to the residence permit (Tognetti Bordogna, 2012). Another problem related to the lack of sufficient knowledge of the Italian language which limited these women's contacts with external society. At the beginning

of the new millennium, the phenomenon of migrant women employed as domestics and carers for the elderly, mostly as live-in workers, became increasingly wide-spread. This situation has been described in the literature on this issue as a shift from the condition of *colf* to that of *badante*¹ – (Campani & Chiappelli, 2014), namely from being employed in upper class Italian families as domestic maids (*colf*) to being employed as carers for elderly people (*badante*) also by lower income families due to the absence of sufficient welfare measures.

As already emphasised, the female component of immigration has always been relevant in the Italian landscape. During the first years of 2000 it accounted to about 49% of the total population of foreign residents and since the year 2008 it has outnumbered the male one. However, there is a rather marked difference among national groups where there is a strong female prevalence (e.g. Romania, Moldova, Poland, Philippines, Peru, Ecuador, Bulgaria) and those in which, on the contrary, the male component prevails (Bangladesh, Egypt, Pakistan, Senegal, Tunisia, Nigeria). In 2017 it was 52% of the regular foreign population amounting to 2,672,000 women. Half of migrant women (50,2%) are em-

¹ This term, which literally means “the one who looks after”, carries a derogatory connotation, which reflects a negative attitude both towards old people and migrants. The term has been criticised by migrant organisations but is commonly used.

ployed in the labour market, however most of them still work in low paid and low skilled sectors, even when they are highly educated. Indeed, a recent report (Maioni and Gallotti, 2016) states that 20% of family assistants have a University degree and 54,4% have studied for a period which correspond to a secondary school. Furthermore, their situation has been described as a “frozen professional destiny” (Campani & Chiappelli, 2014) because domestic and care work is not a temporary occupation leading to more qualified jobs, but tends to become a permanent position.

Concerning migrant women’s activism, during the ‘80s migrant women’s associations started to be set up on a national basis², while it was not until the mid ‘90s that women’s intercultural associations, composed of both migrant and Italian-born women, were created. Before that time, the relationship between migrant and Italian-born women associations was rather difficult, as indicated by Pojmann (2006): “Migrant women first viewed Italian women as privileged, while Italian women saw migrant women as somehow outside the realm of Italian

feminism” (p.72) Interestingly, the turning point that led to setting up joint associations was the UN Beijing Conference on Women in 1995; ironically, it was in Beijing that some migrant women’s leaders first met with Italian feminists.

3.1. Feminist intercultural practices within women’s intercultural associations in Italy

This article is based on research on feminist intercultural practices in Italy which investigates six women’s intercultural associations, namely Almaterra and Almateatro based in Turin, Nosotras and Punto di partenza in Florence, Trama di Terre in Imola and Le Mafalde in Prato³. This type of associations brings together migrant and Italian-born women with a mission founded on feminist and anti-racist aims. The majority of these associations combine a range of services and activities to promote migrant women’s rights with awareness raising and intercultural activities. Almaterra, Trama di terre and Nosotras are regarded as the most well-known associations of this kind and were founded at the end of the ‘90s (Pojmann, 2006). Almateatro is a group dedicated to theatre activities that only recently separated from the larger Almaterra. The reason for choosing women’s intercultural associations as object of my research lies in the fact that

² The most significant associations that were set up during the ‘80s are the Association of Women from Cape Verde, the Filipino Women’s Council and the Eritrean Women’s Association. Eastern women’s associations were first set up in the ‘90s, following migration flows from those countries. There are also confessional women’s associations such as ADMI, the Association of Muslim Women in Italy. For an in-depth analysis of migrant women’s associations in Italy see Pojman 2006.

³ This article focuses mostly on the following associations: Almaterra and Almateatro, Nosotras and Trama di terre.

these associations bring together Italian born and migrant women from different countries with the aim of supporting migrant women as well as promoting antiracist and intercultural activities. Because the main aim of this research is that of investigating the relationship between Italian born and migrant women and the encounter between different feminist trajectories, this typology of associations serves the scope better than other associations, for instance those composed only of migrant women or nationality-based. These organizations are also interesting in that they normally do not only provide for support services to migrant women, but also carry out intercultural and awareness raising activities on migration related issues. Therefore, they are best suited to investigate how they bring together feminist and anti-racist aims in their everyday work and in their outreach activities.

The methodology adopted combines in-depth interviews with women who are members of the associations with the use of documentary analysis of the associations' texts and publications, and the scripts of performances in the case of Almateatro. The rationale for combining these methods lies in the aim of comparing official policies and discourses produced by the associations, through documentary analysis, with the "relation between individual belief and organisational ideology" (Reinharz, 1992, p.148) through in-depth interviews.

I carried out 27 anonymous in-depth interviews in 2012-2013 with migrant (16) and Italian-born (11) women who hold specific roles within the associations. In addition, fieldwork included participating in a number of seminars, events and informal gatherings organised by these associations over a one-and-a-half year period. The migrant women I interviewed come mostly from Eastern Europe, Africa and South America. The majority have acquired Italian citizenship through long-term residence in Italy and/or having married an Italian national. The age of both the Italian-born and migrant women interviewed varies widely, ranging from 26 to 70, and their level of education is generally high (the majority of women interviewed, both migrant and Italian-born, hold a secondary school degree).

In-depth interviews were based on an interview guide which consisted of three sections. The first included a profile of the interviewee's biography and of the history, mission and values of the association. The second section dealt with the issues, activities and role played by the association. It focused on the choice of the addressed issues, the main obstacles faced, and the importance of the relationship with other women's and migrant/intercultural associations. The last section addressed the challenges and the most sensitive areas of research. It focused on the relationships among the women

members of the association and on the power-sharing and decision-making between Italian-born and migrant women. It asked about the position of migrant women in the association and their influence on the policies of the organisation. It also included a part addressed to Italian-born women about their process of reflection on their own positionality.

4. FEMALE GENITAL MUTILATIONS AND CROSS-CULTURAL COMPARISONS ON PRACTICES DETRIMENTAL TO WOMEN

4.1 “Who is the last one?”: cross-cultural comparisons on practices detrimental to women

The next sections I will analyse how the selected associations have dealt with a number of practices, specifically female genital mutilations and forced marriages, which are normally regarded as examples of cultural difference. This section analyses how two of the examined intercultural associations – Almateatro and Nosotras - have addressed the practice of FGM. Almateatro produced a performance on this subject entitled “Who is the last one?” that attempts to promote a cross-cultural comparison on practices that are detrimental to women. “Who is the last one?” compares FGM with aesthetic vaginal surgery. The performance is part of a project opposing FGM and aimed at promoting awareness among the migrant population about the 2006 law forbidding FGM in Italy. However,

the performance also aims at prompting a general debate on societal norms that women have to conform to in different cultures in order to be accepted and respected. In the play the two practices – FGM and aesthetic vaginal surgery⁴ – are discussed by Italian and African women who compare the reasons that bring women to carry them out, in relation to concepts of beauty, virtue and femininity. The women protagonists of the play are sitting in a doctor’s waiting room and their discussion focuses initially on women’s aesthetic surgery as Milly, an Italian-born woman, talks about her desire to modify some parts of her body. She then starts to read a catalogue with a list of possible surgeries, with prices, that includes vaginal surgery. At that point Idia, an African woman, interrupts Milly and emphasises that this is done on little girls in her country and concludes:

They say: why do you talk about our traditions and want to take them away? Women are cut to become more beautiful in other places ...

To me it is the same ... The body is built by someone else ... shaped, altered, mutilated, closed [...] (Bordin, 2008, p.12, author’s translation)

The performance then alternates the narration of the reasons why FGM should be practised with the description of the de-

⁴ For further reflection on a comparison between FGM and aesthetic vaginal surgery see: Bennett (2012); Berer (2010).

sire to stop the ageing of the body and the incapacity to accept its modification. Through this narrative the performance underlines that, even though through different modalities, women always have a price to pay to conform to social norms about womanhood and to be accepted in their society. The performance ends with the protagonists asking in the strongest possible terms ‘who will be the last woman to suffer violence and discrimination?’.

The issues addressed in the performance had been long discussed within Almateatro as well as in the larger association Alma-terra giving rise to disagreement among the women. The debate centred around what can be regarded as harmful practices against women, the possibility of finding some form of global consensus, and the risks of slipping into a position of cultural relativism. In relation to such questions, Anna, an Italian-born woman, explained:

We had a discussion group among the women ... where we also discussed genital mutilation and there were some women, the feminists from '68 in fact, saying: “Oh no you mutilated, you have to stop with this practice”. So in that case there was a form of imposition without asking for the reasons for the practice. I mean it is not something that can be excused, but we need to understand the reasons because if you

do not go to the roots [...] So I said, we western women are also psychologically maimed, ... and I raised the example of eating disorders, the perennial non-acceptance of one's body because it has to meet the image of Barbie ... and so on [...]

Contrary to what Anna states, according to Ada, the comparison between different practices that are detrimental to women is not helpful in understanding each other's forms of discrimination, but is just regarded as “mutual tolerance”. Ada defined such comparison as “intolerable”, and emphasised the voluntary nature of aesthetic surgery, as this is a choice made by adults, albeit “stupid adults”, whereas FGM is practised on children. Anna criticises the idea that aesthetic surgery is the result of a free choice on the basis of the fact that almost all women feel inadequate about their physical appearance. Her implicit conclusion is that western culture leads to women not accepting their body as it has to conform to impossible standards. Similarly with regard to the comparison between FGM and aesthetic surgery, Karen, a migrant woman from Sub-saharian Africa said “we have physical mutilations and you have psychological mutilations” and she added:

Why do we have infibulation? It is because there is a culture that says a woman should not have sex before marriage. It is something to do with men, a woman must be beautiful; it is always

something to do with men, anyway [...] everything that you do is related to giving pleasure to men or pleasing the world or earning money from women.

In conclusion, the operation carried out by Almateatro with the performance “Who is the last one?” appears to echo the concerns expressed by feminist postcolonial authors who advocate for the need to set a relative value on the different kinds of oppression that women face in different cultures. For instance, hooks (2000: 46-47) explicitly acknowledges the need to analyse how practices that involve women’s bodies are globally linked. In particular, she refers to linking FGM to life-threatening eating disorders or aesthetic surgery which derive from the imposition of cultural norms about thinness. Mendoza (2002) focuses on the issue of “who sets the agenda” in international forums and underlines that it would be interesting to see if women from the South could raise issues concerning women from the North – such as anorexia or sexual objectification of women in the media – in the same way that women from the North talk about FGM or the Islamic veil. Feminist postcolonial authors (Ahmed, 2000; Mohanty, 2003; hooks, 2000, Spivak, 1993) have often highlighted the need to establish similar comparisons in order to overcome the image of Third World women as necessarily less emancipated than their Western counterparts, as well as to identify a number of practices that

are detrimental to women and prevalent in the West but which are normally not considered as such, but simply the result of free choice. These comparisons can be regarded as useful when trying to avoid a position of what Anthias (2002) defines “feminist fundamentalism”.

Finally, it appears that the most important value of a cross-cultural comparison between different practices that are detrimental to women, such as that operated by Almateatro, is a contribution towards not reproducing racist and imperialist views when addressing cultural practices such as FGM. It also contributes to stripping away the mask of “free will” that hides detrimental cultural practices towards women in western countries.

4.2 Nosotras’ critique of cultural relativism in relation to female genital mutilations

The other association that has developed a specific expertise on the issue of FGM is Nosotras. The association is co-founder of EuroNet, a European network on FGM, and has carried out many awareness-raising, training and research activities on the issue addressed to the local migrant population as well as to professionals, doctors, social workers and teachers. After Italy, in 2006, adopted a law sanctioning FGM at a penal level, the association advocated the need to consider the penal sanction as an extreme solution to be used only following pre-

ventive measures. The association identifies FGM as a human rights issue that needs to be addressed through women's empowerment. At the same time, it emphasises that:

It would be a particularly detestable form of racism to think of cultures and traditions that are different from the western ones as fixed and monolithic structures and not as complex social forms that are also in constant evolution and above all to answer to fundamental moral instances. (Nosotras, 2010, p.14, author's translation)

Within this general framework there was one specific circumstance in which the association expressed itself strongly against any so-called "alternative rite" to FGM. This happened in 2004 when the Director for the Centre for the Prevention and Treatment of FGM in Florence proposed an alternative rite to FGM by which the girl would have punctured her clitoris with a needle, causing a small amount of bleeding. The proposal led to intense debates and Nosotras was at the forefront of the opposition that eventually led to the rejection of the proposal by the relevant bodies. The President, Laila Abi, explained that Nosotras' policy is in favour of a total eradication of FGM practices and opposes any medicalisation process. She regards FGM as a means to control women's sexuality and to keep women in subordinated positions (Abi, 2005).

Moreover, she describes the practice of the alternative rite as discriminatory and racist and as an example of cultural relativism which she rejects. Abi emphasises that culture is not a fixed concept, and that African countries are going through great changes, thus she seems to adhere to a social constructivist idea of culture which highlights the dynamic nature of culture, as well as its internal conflicts (Benhabib, 2002). In conclusion, it can be argued that the association frames its policies around a concept of FGM as a human rights violation and on the basis of a critique of a cultural relativist argument on this issue.

5. TRAMA DI TERRE'S CRITIQUE TO MULTICULTURALISM AND THE WORK ON FORCED MARRIAGES

Trama di terre is the association that has most explicitly addressed the relationship between women's rights and multiculturalism. The association understands the concept of multiculturalism as referring to those policies that promote the idea of non-interference in cultural practices including those that are detrimental for women on the basis of the principle of respect for cultural difference. Such an interpretation appears more in line with a liberal concept of multiculturalism than with reflexive or critical multiculturalism. In particular, the association emphasises that, in a number of circumstances, cases of domestic violence

against migrant women are dismissed or not given sufficient attention by social workers or courts on the basis of the assumption that they are 'family matters' that pertain to 'different' cultures than the western one.

The President of the association Tiziana del Prà explains that only a few years earlier they would have not addressed similar topics for the fear of being judged racist. However, the occurrence of some events led the association to take a public position on the issue. She recalled some turning points that the association went through that led them to address these issues publicly, namely: the public request of help formulated by some migrant women in relation to serious forms of violence they suffered from their relatives; some events occurred in Italy that spurred much public indignation, such as the killing of a Pakistani girl by her father due to her way of life that he judged as too Westernised; the request of help that the association received about cases of forced marriages. The association therefore launched some petitions and organized a number of seminars in order to specifically address forms of violence against women that are justified in the name of culture or religion. The association advocates the need to fight against any form of cultural relativism and it condemns any attempt to soften human rights standards in relation to women's situation in the name of respect for cultural difference. In relation to this, An-

nina, an Italian-born woman member of the association, stated:

It's not that we didn't discuss our position, but the fact is that we are now in a phase beyond colonialism. There has been colonialism, there has been the criticism of being colonialist, there has been the fear of being regarded as colonialist, which has meant that everything could go in the name of anti-colonialism. Now there is the fact that we can speak publicly ... I think that it is colonialist to think that freedom is a western thing, this is arrogant as it implies that freedom belongs more to one culture than to another ... throughout the world women have stood against male power, maybe they didn't call themselves feminist, but they acted even in the most remote parts of the world.

The association has also dedicated a specific attention to the issue of forced marriages. Because Trama di terre was called to act as mediator in some cases of forced marriages in which the girl requested help to the association, it felt the need to go more in-depth to better understand the phenomenon at local level and to promote a public debate on how to regulate the matter at policy and legislative level. The association promoted the realization of a research on the phenomenon which identified 33 cases of forced marriages within the Region of Emilia Romagna,

out of which only 3 concerned boys. The research report poses the question of the distinction between arranged and forced marriages by asking if, based on the daughters' subjectivity, the impositions are lived as such, or accepted as part of the education, adopted in the construction of their own female identity (Danna, 2011, p.189). The report concludes that:

For the purpose of public action, violence is what is subjectively perceived as such, while the moral evaluation of the effective conditions of the choice remains open to discussion and should be handled in the cultural debate. The border between imposed marriage and combined but accepted marriage must be delineated by the same person who realises to have been subjected to an imposition or accepts the marriage proposal. (Danna, 2011, pp.13-14)

This difficulty is acknowledged also by Phillips when she states that:

The question, rather, is at what point do the familial and social pressures that make arranged marriage a norm turn into coercion [...] Differentiating between choice and coercion is central to solving this problem. This means understanding cultural pressures, but not assuming that culture dictates. (Phillips, 2007, p.41)

In 2011 Trama di terre opened a shelter for girls who requested help in order to es-

cape forced marriages in which it has welcomed girls, mostly from Muslim families "coming from countries where marriage is almost always a patriarchal institution based on blood ties". (Trama di terre, 2014, p.34). The association also promoted a public debate on the issue by organising some seminars to which it invited representatives of the South Hall Black Sisters to present the experience on forced marriage in the UK, as well as representatives of two Moroccan women's associations, the Association Democratique des femmes du Maroc, and the association INSAT for women victims of violence and single mothers to talk about early marriages in Morocco and the actions undertaken by women's associations. The work of Trama di terre on the issue eventually led to the recent approval of guidelines for professionals on forced, combined and early marriages (Trama di terre, 2014) that define these different typologies of marriages and present the position of international organizations on the issue, as well as the different regulations enacted by European countries. The document spells out the pros and cons of criminalising forced marriages and it also addresses the delicate role of mediation in this field by describing its potential advantages and risks. Finally, the guidelines provide for some recommendations aimed at preventing and contrasting forced marriages that include information and policy/legislative measures.

In conclusion, Trama di terre is the association that among those explored has most explicitly advocated for the need to condemn violations of women's rights involving migrant women by avoiding any justification based on cultural grounds and by specifically addressing situations involving migrant women such as forced marriages.

6. CONCLUSIONS

This paper described different ways to address the possible tensions between multiculturalism and women's rights that have been enacted by the examined women's intercultural associations in the Italian context. In the current political debate which tend to oppose women's rights to the possibility of multicultural societies, such a task assumes a paramount importance. As recent scholarship emphasises (Farris, 2017), there is a tendency by nationalist parties and movements to appropriate the language of women's rights and co-opt feminist values with antimigrant aims. Women's intercultural associations are best placed to address this challenge as they work simultaneously to promote women's rights and interculturalism. This research has investigated the different modalities used by the chosen associations to pursue this objective.

Almateatro has advocated for the need to interrogate ourselves about what constitute gender inequality. In particular

through its performance "Who is the last one?" it has provided an example of cross cultural comparisons on practices detrimental to women. Almateatro's work appears to endorse the preoccupations and view point of postcolonial feminism as it has promoted a cross-cultural reflection on social norms and expectations around women by unveiling practices prevalent in the West that are detrimental to women but are not normally regarded as such.

Nosotras has framed its work on FGM against cultural relativism and has founded its policies on the subject not only on the basis that some of the women members of the association come from the countries where FGM are practiced and have undergone them, but also based on the fact that they are an intercultural women's group which promotes women's rights. The association endorses a social constructivist concept of culture emphasizing its evolving nature and arguing that it is racist to consider these practices as symbols of the culture of specific populations without understanding the complexities and changes that are traversing African societies. The women members of the association have also not been afraid to speak against the opinion of other leaders of local migrant groups for instance in relation to proposals of alternative rites to FGM.

Trama di Terre is the association that has mostly openly addressed the issue of the possible contradictions between mul-

ticulturalism and women's rights. The organisation has framed its policies on specific practices such as forced marriages and other forms of violence suffered by migrant women on its longstanding experience of welcoming and supporting migrant women as well as on its cooperation with associations of women from ethnic minorities in Europe, such as the SBS, and from some countries of origin such as Morocco and Pakistan. These collaborations can be regarded as a strategic mean to strengthen the position of the association also considering that the President of the association is, since its foundation, an Italian-born woman. While the association has always addressed violence against women in general terms and it recently set up an anti-violence centre which is open to all women, they have also advocated for the need to intervene in relation to specific forms of violence which involve the migrant population, such as forced marriages.

In conclusion, my research identified different modalities of working on cultural difference endorsed by the selected associations. Some organizations work more at a cultural level in order to deconstruct images of migrant women as victims or symbols of cultural difference and by questioning the meaning of gender discrimination, others emphasize the need to support migrant women in their specific needs, while continuing to address gender based violence more broadly. The

experiences of the intercultural settings analysed show the importance of keeping together feminist and antiracist aims when addressing examples of cultural difference. This point is paramount in order to develop forms of critical multiculturalism and to avoid the current backlash which tends to oppose feminist values to the possibilities of maintaining multicultural societies.

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