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Participation of Migrant Women in Political and Democratic Life in Italy

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I. Introduction

The aim of this paper is to examine the participation of migrant women in political and democratic life in Italy. The main indicators we are following are – voting rights, the right to stand as candidates, the right to join political parties, and the right, opportunity, and space to influence public decision-making processes.

This paper is written within the framework of the WE-EMPOWER project, which uses an inclusive definition of migrant women – for us, the term **'migrant women' refers to ALL women, including gender non-conforming persons, those who have been displaced between countries, trafficked, have moved from a third or European country to a destination in Europe, or women who are second-generation migrants.**

Effective participation of migrant women is necessary so that they can contribute their ideas and proposals to the development of the societies they live in. However, in Italy there are still many barriers to migrant women's visibility and voices in public and political spaces, and this is why it is important to have a deeper understanding of the context around migration, migrant women, and participation in Italy.

In Italy, women of migrant origin, both first and second generation, present differently to their male counterparts, as they are autonomous individuals in migratory flows, in the labour market and in society, where they engage with associations, develop new forms of activism and take part in artistic and literary endeavours. Nevertheless, migrant women remain stuck between a "strong desire for personal affirmation and chronic exposure to conditions of vulnerability" (Redattore Sociale, 2023).

II. Migrant Women in Italy

In the last few decades, more women have migrated to Italy, either for work, education, and/or family reasons. Research into migration has mostly been about migrant workers in general and not necessarily disaggregated according to gender. Migrant women in Italy are therefore unsurprisingly under-researched. This reflects the long-standing debate regarding the issue of the so-called 'gender data gap',¹ which is about how women are ignored or under-represented in the statistics (Perez, 2020).^{2,3}

According to the official data (ISTAT, 2012), **migrants living in Italy represent 7.5% of the population (4,570,317 million). Ukrainians, Moldavians, Poles, Peruvians, and Ecuadorians have higher percentages of women**, while Indians, Tunisians, Egyptians, and Bangladeshi are mostly men.

In Italy, there is no definition of 'migrant' in law. The term includes several well-defined legal categories of migrants, such as "migrant workers", referring to persons whose types of movements are legally defined; "smuggled migrants" whose status or means of movement are not specifically defined under international law; and international students. Additionally, Italy does not have an independent integration law.

Issues related to the arrival and integration of migrants have become increasingly contentious in Italy over the past decade, as right-wing populist parties have made the issue a key element of their respective political platforms. A key role has also been played by the centre-left, the first to have approved restrictive measures to prevent new arrivals while entering into controversial agreements with third-country actors to prohibit new departures from reaching Italian shores. Counter narratives about the need for Italy (a country still experiencing emigration and affected by a very low birth-rate) to actually allow and integrate migrants and workers in order to make the welfare state sustainable, have fallen on deaf ears.⁴

¹ Caroline Criado Perez (2020) - We Need to Close the Gender Data Gap By Including Women in Our Algorithms, <https://time.com/collection/davos-%202020/5764698/gender-data-gap/>

² Maria Elena Pontecorvo, (2023), Indagine Istat: stranieri e naturalizzati nel mercato del lavoro italiano, Stranieri in Italia Magazine <https://stranieriinitalia.it/attualita/indagine-istat-stranieri-e-naturalizzati-nel-mercato-del-lavoro-italiano>

³ Alessandra Tosi (2020) - *Migrant women are the first to suffer Italy's gender pay gap*, Italics Magazine, <https://italicsmag.com/2020/11/30/on-italys-gender-pay-and-data-gap-and-migrant-women/>

⁴ Juliani M.Campisi, Cecilia Emma Sittilota (2022) - <https://www.iai.it/en/pubblicazioni/italys-far-right-and-migration-debate-implications-europe> - Istituto Affari Internazionali

The “Annual report on the labour market situation of immigrants in Italy, 2022”,⁵ issued by the Minister of Labour and Social Policies in Italy, provides a detailed analysis of the presence and proportion of migrants, both EU citizens and third-country nationals (TCNs), in the labour market in Italy. According to this report, the biggest migrant communities are Romanian (1,076,000 people in total), Albanian (421,000) and Moroccan (414,000).⁶ **Among migrants coming from Eastern Europe there is a higher female percentage (60% Romanians and 78% Ukrainians), employed especially as domestic workers.** Irregular migrants, particularly from Africa and Asia, are mostly male. In **2020, most migrants residing in Italy were women (53.6%)**. According to IOM surveys in 2019 and 2020, economic reasons along with persecution and violence seem to be among the most common push factors, always appearing as the respondents’ first two choices.

Migrants, especially irregulars from non-EU countries, are more likely to be precarious workers, earning less than Italians, and have a higher unemployment rate (13% against 8.7%) and a higher proportion of NEET,⁷ among the youth and women.

Stretching into the Central Mediterranean Sea, Italy is a natural corridor to enter Europe, receiving thousands of refugees and irregular migrants from Africa and Asia annually. Recently, Italy declared a “state of emergency” over the migration situation as Italian coast guards had rescued more than 31,000 migrants since January 2023 (Wallis, 2023). However, humanitarian organisations argue that this declaration is exaggerated, as it is not the first time Italy has made such a statement and according to some experts, Italy is looking for reasons to violate their obligations to allow migrants to seek asylum in the country (Ibid.). Moreover, once migrants arrive and are placed in reception centres, they face many issues made exacerbated by complex asylum application processes and poor conditions at the reception centres (Wallis, 2022).

Russia’s invasion of Ukraine has also brought many Ukrainians to Italy – by October 2022, 172,405 refugees from Ukraine had arrived. Most of them are women (91,788) and children (51,101).⁸ Like many EU countries, Italy has also provided a warm welcome to Ukrainian refugees compared to refugees from other countries. A recent study found that

⁵ Only data from labor market information is used.

⁶ Annual report on the labour market situations of immigrants in Italy, 2022 - https://ec.europa.eu/migrant-integration/library-document/2022-annual-report-labour-market-situations-immigrants-italy_en

⁷ NEET -Young People - Not in Education, Employment or Training

⁸ https://www.esteri.it/en/politica-estera-e-cooperazione-allo-sviluppo/aree_geografiche/europa/litalia-a-sostegno-dellucraina/

in Italy, attitudes towards Syrian refugees are more negative than towards Ukrainians (Drazanova and Geddes, 2022).

III. Barriers to Participation for Migrant Women

a) Legal barriers to participation in political life

In general, migrants' opportunities for collective action and political activism are limited for various reasons. These include the increasingly restrictive immigration and asylum legal regimes of Italy, which prevent access to a residence permit in the country and endanger migrants who would like to participate and to be more visible in public. Even for those migrants with residence permits, it could be difficult to benefit from full political rights because of the linkage between citizenship status and electoral rights. In 2002, the Italian government passed the "Bossi-Fini" law, which introduced criminal sanctions for migrants without residence permits (ERRC, 2002). Under this law, the residence permit was linked to an employment contract, which removed the need for a "sponsor" who acts as a guarantor for the migrant (Obasuyi, 2022). The law has since been abolished but it symbolised how immigration is viewed as "a 'problem' of public order".⁹

Access to the right to vote for migrants, and migrant women at the local and national level in Italy is linked to their country of origin status. All EU citizens living as residents in Italy and registered as resident in the local community are legally entitled to vote in certain Italian elections, specifically municipal and European elections. Registration to vote in either of these elections does not automatically qualify a voter for the other. An EU citizen may also stand as a candidate at municipal elections, under the same conditions as an Italian national. **Third-country nationals who are not EU citizens do not have voting rights in Italy.**

⁹ Oiza Obasuyi (2022) – Partecipazione Politica Persone Straniere Italia, Fondazione Feltrinelli <https://fondazionefeltrinelli.it/partecipazione-politica-persone-straniere-italia/>

b) Social and cultural barriers to participation in democratic life

For migrant women, **unequal gender relations and gender-based discrimination** are barriers to their political participation and activism.¹⁰ Italy is ranked among the countries in the EU with the lowest gender equality, according to the European Gender Equality Index (EIGE, 2022). Policies to re-address gender inequality have been cautious, while progress in the legal framework has been promoted mainly by directives coming from the EU or by pressure from civil society. Italy lacks a proper gender infrastructure at the national level to promote, coordinate and monitor gender equality initiatives. In addition to the problems of racial prejudice and xenophobia, cultural stereotypes and gender discrimination exist as barriers for migrant women. The lack of access to sexual and reproductive health services also poses a serious issue for women. For instance, data from the Health Ministry,¹¹ published in June 2021 showed that 64.6% of gynaecologists and 44.6% of anaesthesiologists in Italy refuse to perform abortions. Access to medical abortion, using prescription drugs to end a pregnancy safely, also varied significantly among regions of the country, with a national average of 35% across procedures.¹² These provisions directly affect the capacity of all women, especially migrant women who are already lacking access to basic healthcare, to have a free and independent life.

With regard to labour participation, in 2020, **only one in two migrant women worked, and they are poorer than the European average** (when compared with migrant women in other European countries) (InfoMigrants, 2022). Some reasons can be attributed to cultural factors, depending on the traditions of the country of origin, while others are due to reasons of entry into Italy.

Migrant women who enter for family reunification find it difficult to enter the world of work. According to findings published in the 2021 IDOS Statistical Immigration Dossier, in 2020, 14% of migrant women reported being underemployed, compared to 8.1% in 2019 and 9.1% of

¹⁰ Ilaria Boiano - (2022) - *Migrant and refugee women's political participation as essential prerequisite for gender equality and genuine democracy* - Consulting EUTH Project - <https://consulting-euthproject.eu/2022/06/01/migrant-and-refugee-womens-political-participation-as-essential-prerequisite-for-gender-equality-and-genuine-democracy>

¹¹ Ministero della Salute (2020) - *Relazione Del Ministro Della Salute Sulla Attuazione Della Legge Contenente Norme Per La Tutela Sociale Della Maternità E Per L'interruzione Volontaria Di Gravidanza (Legge 194/78)* - https://www.salute.gov.it/imgs/C_17_pubblicazioni_3236_allegato.pdf

¹² Human Rights Watch (2023) World Report: Italy <https://www.hrw.org/world-report/2023/country-chapters/italy>

Italian women. The percentage of over-educated migrant women also remained high, with 42.3% of migrant women workers possessing a higher skill level than required for their job. This is significantly higher than both Italian women (24.8%) and male migrants (27.7%). Migrant women workers not only earn 17% less (894 euros per month) than the general average of migrants, but also 28.2% less than Italian female workers (1,245 euros), already receiving a lower average salary than that of fellow countrymen (IDOS, 2021).

When migrant women do work, they are often placed in sectors where they are more likely to receive unfavourable treatment: as domestic workers, caregivers, and cleaning staff in offices and businesses. In the domestic sector, there is a high concentration of undeclared work. **Migrant women in the care-giving and domestic sector are one of the least protected groups of workers under international and national labour legislation.** Their vulnerability emerges from a lack of skills recognition, which would enable them to get jobs in other fields. They often work in the intimate sphere of the home in close proximity to their employers. Degani says there is a “paradoxical” exclusion of migrant care workers from political and public debates on the securitisation of migrants (Degani, 2022).

Nowadays, as Italian families become increasingly dependent on external help for domestic work, migrant women are mostly employed as caregivers. More than two out of five migrant women (who are employed) work in this sector. Silvia Dumitrache of the Associazione Donne Romene (ADRI)¹³ in Italy (ADRI) explains, “The figures are clear: seven out of ten pensioners cannot afford to legally employ home help on their incomes. The state knows this but does nothing about it. There is a lot of rhetoric about the crucial role these workers play, but it is institutionalised exploitation. They are not only invisible, but they are also deliberately ignored.” (Marchese, 2021).

The increasing presence of migrant women in Italy – characterised by many internal differences in terms of migratory experience and legal status (Bonizzoni, 2011), triggered an increasing interest from the media and, slowly, the feminisation of migration began to be visible even in the press, modifying the predominant representation of migration as an essentially male phenomenon (Giorgi, 2012). Nevertheless, an analysis of the media reveals **a systematic lack of attention to issues of concern to migrant women.**

¹³ ADRI is a partner of the WE-EMPOWER project, and a member of the WIDE+ migration and gender working group. <https://adriassociazione.wordpress.com/>

Migrant women are predominantly represented through a cultural lens, portrayed as ‘the Other’. Very few studies specifically focus on migrant women in the Italian press (Campani, 2001; Censis, 2002). When they do become visible, migrant women are mainly depicted as maids, as reassuring figures. There is also an emotive image of the migrant prostitute – submissive, completely dependent on men, and often labeled as a “slave”. This victimised figure has contributed towards criminalising migrants – and the press completely ignores cases of women who managed to regain control over their lives. Second, the Muslim woman, arriving through family reunification, often gets presented as “the Other”, submissive toward Muslim men and completely embedded in the culture of her country of origin.

Table 1 shows the topics related to images of migrant women and focuses especially on reproductive rights. A large percentage is related to sexuality: this category includes topics as prostitution, gender relationships, and other related issues (forced marriages and ‘female genital mutilation’). 15% of articles focus on migrant women and maternity and, more broadly, on the relationship between migrant mothers and their children (in Italy and abroad). The last category includes a variety of articles that mention migrant women in relation to other topics, such as their presence in the labour market.

Table I - Migrant Women and the Italian Press - Topics Distribution (Percentages)

Topic	Non-partisan	Catholic	Left	Right	Total
Maternity	20	16	4	3	15
Sexuality	17	18	32	38	22
Fertility/Abortion	39	49	51	43	42
Various + mix	24	17	13	16	21
Total	100	100	100	100	100

Source: Alberta Giorgi, 2012, *The Cultural Construction of Migrant Women in the Italian Press*

c) Impact of COVID-19 on migrant women

During the COVID-19 pandemic, employers silenced healthcare workers who raised concerns about working conditions in care homes (Amnesty International, 2021). Violence against women persisted and obstacles to accessing abortion were not addressed. A UNICEF report (2022) found that migrant women in Italy experienced an increased risk of violence due to greater isolation, less access to services and support networks/centres.

In 2021, Italy saw a total of 93 women killed in domestic violence incidents, 70 of those by partners or ex-partners (Reuters, 2021). In December 2021, the government approved a bill to strengthen measures to prevent violence against women and domestic violence. These included access to early provisional compensation during criminal investigations for victims who report the abuse and broader powers for the authorities to adopt surveillance and coercive measures against perpetrators (Ibid).

In October 2021, the Senate blocked a bill aimed at combatting discrimination and violence based on sex/gender, sexual orientation, gender identity and disability (Euronews, 2021). The bill would have extended to LGBTI people, women, and people with disabilities, the same protections available to victims of hate speech and hate crimes based on racist, religious, ethnic and nationalist motives, having the direct effect of providing less protection to migrant women as victims of gender-based violence.

In 2020, a 'regularisation project' was launched, aimed at ensuring people with irregular status could obtain residence and work permits and access health services during the pandemic – however, it achieved limited results. The measure only applied to workers in the agri-food sector and domestic workers (including domestic care workers) (PICUM, 2021). While 89% of domestic workers are women, data shows that two in three migrant men applied for regularisation (Degani, 2022). Fewer migrant women applying for regularisation leads to the "persistence of exploitation" (Ibid). Domestic workers who are migrant women continue to have irregular working conditions and are systematically excluded from labour regulations and benefits.

IV. Participation of Migrant Women in Political Life

Given the multiple barriers migrant women face in participation, the opportunities for them to play an active part in political life are very limited. While voting rights are exclusively for Italian and EU citizens, migrant women who are third-country nationals have no possibility of being active in political life. Additionally, female representation in Italian politics remain very low.

In order to increase female representation in Italian politics, gender quotas and 'double gender' preference have been introduced in administrative elections, i.e. the possibility of voting for a woman and a man on the ballot paper. Double gender preference is a new mechanism that does not reserve a share of seats to the under-represented sex, but redresses the under-representation of women in decision-making assemblies, through a second preference vote. Thanks to this, greater gender balance of assemblies is encouraged, but it is not imposed. Like quotas, the double gender preference is a neutrally worded anti-discrimination measure, as it does not affect, directly or indirectly, the results of elections.

In force since 2013, according to a recent study, the measures influenced the composition of local administrations, increasing the representation of women in municipal councils by 18%. Despite good results, double preference may not yet have reached its full potential. Gender quotas and double preference are solutions that open the door to politics but are far from conferring full political power.¹⁴

Even more notable inequalities can be found in municipal and regional administration; even if local representation is increasingly inclusive, according to the Senate report on gender equality, **fewer than 15% of mayors are women.**¹⁵ There are many obstacles to overcome in the political process of selection and being elected. The scarcity of female role models is a deterring factor. Furthermore, due to the low presence of women, low expectations of success are formed, which further discourages participation.

Overall, there is a general lack of policies for gender mainstreaming. Both laws and practices are usually gender blind and often contribute

¹⁴ Di Orizonti Politici (2020): Più donne in politica, ma senza grandi poteri -La Voce <https://www.lavoce.info/archives/67586/piu-donne-in-politica-ma-senza-grandi-poteri/>

¹⁵ Bocconi University (2023) -Italy, a realtime case study of female leadership, <https://www.viasarfatti25.unibocconi.eu/notizia.php?idArt=25213>

A notable example of female politician in Italy with migrant background

Cécile Kashetu Kyenge is an Italian politician and ophthalmologist. She was the Minister for Integration in the 2013–14 Letta Cabinet, and Italy's first black government minister. She proposed a law that would give citizenship to the children of immigrants if they were born on Italian soil.

Both the Italian and international press have regularly reported outrageous racist speeches against her coming from influential members of the parliament, elected politicians, members of local constituencies and city councils (Meret, Corte, and Sangiuliano (2013). The words of Cécile Kyenge at her first press conference replying to mainstream media which kept on calling her 'the first coloured minister', she replied: "I am not coloured, I am black and proud of being that...we need indeed to use the right words, starting from those we employ to define diversity, which is a resource".

She was elected in 2014 to the European Parliament where she was a member of the Committee on Civil Liberties, Justice and Home Affairs.

to the mere reproduction of inequalities and the stereotypical vision of women. This gender blindness and lack of interest in hearing the voices of migrant women in Parliament have led to the situation where there was only one woman of migrant origin in the Italian Parliament in 2022 (out of 630 deputies and 315 senators) (Petrovic, 2022).

Over the years, there have been some examples of migrant women in public institutions. They include Mercedes Lourdes Frias, from the Dominican Republic, who is the former councillor for immigration in the municipality of Empoli; and Cécile Kyenge, born in the Democratic Republic of Congo, appointed minister of integration by the Letta government in 2013-14 (Pasca, 2013). The elections in 2022 revealed some Italian citizens of migrant origin. They include Ouidad Bakkali, born in Morocco, now a Member of Parliament; Antonella Moro Bundu, born in Sierra Leone, sits on the City Council of Florence; Diye Ndiaye, anthropologist of Senegalese origins, councillor in the Municipality of Scandicci (Florence) since 2014; and Veronica Atitsogbe, of Togolese origin, now a city councillor in Verona, becoming the first second-generation Italian to enter the city council (Sachy, 2022).

V. Participation of Migrant Women in Democratic Life

Migrant women's associations or groups play an important role in promoting participation in Italian society. In Italy, in the 1970s, the first migrant women's associations were established when migrant women first arrived in the country as domestic workers (Chiappelli, 2016). During the 80s, migrant women began organising mutual support networks and solidarity at a national level. These included migrant women's organisations such as the Filipino Women's Council and the Association of Women from Cape Verde (Ibid.). Through these organisations, migrant women carry out different activities, including supporting labour integration of migrant women and advocacy to influence legislation and policy changes (Ibid.).

One example of this is the Association of Romanian Women in Italy, or ADRI, which has been involved in promoting Romanian migrant women's rights for years, in raising awareness of their important role in the economy and society. For example, ADRI, together with Romanian Women's Lobby (RoWL), organised a workshop, "Romanian women are not a minority – the 50/50 Campaign"¹⁶ that took place on 2 November 2022 in Bucharest, Romania. The event was organised within the project, "GLORIA - feminism and the strategic approach to gender equality" by the Community Safety and Mediation Centre Foundation (CMSC), in partnership with the RoWL, with the support of the Green Party in Romania. The themes addressed during the workshop will inform future policy briefs and will make recommendations for new policies to reduce inequalities in women's representation in decision-making positions in Romanian and Italian politics. ADRI also carries out advocacy at the EU level – for instance, it contributed to several European parliamentary written questions regarding the problems faced by migrant women and

¹⁶ <https://www.facebook.com/media/set/?vanity=FeminismGLORIA&set=a.159347323453070>

transnational families, as well as data collection on the children left behind.¹⁷

The table below shows other migrant women's and women-led organisations supporting migrant women in Italy:

Associazione Differenza Donna/Donne Migranti welcomes and hosts migrant women who arrive in Italy for family reunification or for work; they include women who are victims of violence in their country of origin, and in Italy and need to be accompanied on a long journey that requires the reconstruction of a psychophysical identity. www.differenzadonna.org/donne-migranti/

Associazione Stella supports migrant women's access to the labour market in Italy. It supports migrant women in creating and improving their CVs, upskill themselves and gain access to training opportunities. <https://www.facebook.com/stella.associazione>

Casa di Ramia is an intercultural centre that welcomes Italian and migrant women and their children. Over the years, many different migrant women associations have become a part of the house and its activities. It has become a meeting place where migrant women carry out their activities, meet others and do things together.

https://www.comune.verona.it/nqcontent.cfm?a_id=2081&tt=verona_agid

¹⁷ ADRI's advocacy led to formulation of two European parliamentary written questions regarding the problems faced by migrant women and the transnational families, also data collection on the children left behind (2016); Step up EU action to protect the rights of transnational families (2022), since many women who emigrate leave their children, sometimes very young, in the country of origin to work as housekeepers or "carers" taking care of the elderly. See the following articles: https://www.europarl.europa.eu/doceo/document/E-8-2016-002577_IT.html?redirect; <https://www.facebook.com/media/set/?vanity=FeminismGLORIA&set=a.159347323453070;> [https://www.europarl.europa.eu/doceo/document/E-9-2022-000192_IT.pdf;](https://www.europarl.europa.eu/doceo/document/E-9-2022-000192_IT.pdf) <https://aic.camera.it/aic/scheda.html?numero=4/00170&ramo=CAMERA&leg=19;> <https://www.facebook.com/watch/?v=875624330142482> Eleonora Evi and Silvia Dumitrache; <https://pace.coe.int/en/news/8022/leaving-millions-of-labour-migrants-children-without-parental-care-is-a-violation-of-human-rights->

VI. Measures to Promote and Improve the Participation of Migrant Women in Italy

Currently there are no efforts to include migrant women in politics or public decision-making. Besides the national level, many regions have created consultative bodies to bring integration stakeholders together, and local authorities have carried out public consultations (Chiappelli, 2016). However, the participation of civil society organisations and experts varies significantly across regions and is not gender focused. Plus, these efforts remain very much top-down. Public consultations also rarely involve the Immigration Territorial Councils, the consultative bodies operating at the provincial level under the mandate of the interior ministry.

One example of a migrant council that involves migrants and is primarily driven by them is the immigrant advisory council in Naples, (InfoMigrants, 2021). Its primary task is to present proposals to the town council to improve the living conditions of migrants and ultimately influence migration policies. Representatives of the diverse foreign communities living in Naples will take part, though there is no action to create gender parity.

NGOs like Action Aid Italy have also pushed for more migrant participation. In 2021, it launched the “Migrant Voices Heard”¹⁸ project which promotes the involvement of migrants through migrant councils, as direct actors of change, through processes of participation and active citizenship. These processes will be defined and constructed by migrant organisations and communities in the target territories, in collaboration with local authorities and civil society organisations.

¹⁸ See: <https://morethanprojects.actionaid.it/en/projects/migrantvoicesheard/>

VII. Conclusion

There needs to be a coordinated response to a gender-sensitive approach when it comes to migrant integration, particularly to enhance the participation of migrant women. This can be done by ensuring dialogue between civil society and government, in order to share best practice and identify gaps; the collection of systematic gender disaggregated data; better provision of information for migrant women (for example, providing information on rights and resources in various languages); active participation of women's organisations, especially migrant women-led organisations in public consultations; and better funding of migrant women's organisations and women's organisations supporting migrant women.

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