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The gender dimension in assessing migrant women's non-formal and informal learning and skills

Abstract: This research contributes to critical literature in the field of gender and migration studies. The main goals of the research activities were to gain a greater understanding about the training background and personal beliefs influencing the approach of volunteers assessing the migrant women's non-formal and informal learning and skills, the presence of biases in their approach and the interconnections among NGOs, public services and educational institutions dealing with migrant women. The research was based on a qualitative approach, through three strands allowing a data triangulation useful for validation purposes. Firstly, education policies and training activities for migrants, with a focus on gendered approaches, were analysed through desk research and meetings with stakeholders; secondly, in-depth interviews were held with personnel and volunteers doing the initial assessments of migrants' non-formal and informal learning and skills. Finally, ethnographic observation was carried out in organisations, which assess migrants. The results show how the initial assessment of migrant women's non-formal and informal learning and skills is not free from gendered biases and ~~stereotypes~~ **stereotypes**. Moreover, the process is also subject to the constraints imposed by migration and education policies, blind to gendered analysis and planning.



Introduction

All migrants cross a variety of education and training systems, qualification mandates, cultures and languages that may impose barriers to improving their capabilities in new countries. There is increasing scholarship on gender and migration: the feminisation of migration has been analysed (Cuban, 2010), as have skilled women's migration (Webb, 2015) and the role of gendered domination relations within migration paths (Trifanescu, 2015). Women who migrate as refugees or asylum seekers, who are trafficked or forced to move for economic reasons make up a significant percentage of the total numbers.

In this research, my general intention is to explore the gender dimension in the initial informal assessment of migrants¹ non-formal and informal learning and

1 In using the term "migrant(s)", I follow the EMN-European Migration Report Glossary on Asylum and Migration that defines migrant, "a person who leaves their country or region of origin to live in another"; this relates to "any type of movement, whatever its length, composition and causes". As well as refugees, displaced persons and irregular migrants, the term "migrant" includes anyone who leaves their country for employment reasons ("economic migrants", "highly qualified migrants"). A migrant is therefore any person who moves from his or her country of origin irrespective of the causes, voluntary or involuntary, and the means, regular or irregular, used to migrate. Since the EU project at the origin of

skills, often carried out by volunteers working for NGOs, and its influence, in particular, on the subsequent choices of migrant women. To get a deeper understanding of this topic I investigated the training background and personal beliefs influencing the approach of volunteers assessing the migrant women's non-formal and informal learning and skills, the presence of biases in their approach and the interconnections among NGOs, public services and educational institutions dealing with migrant women.

Gender and migration

There is a significant body of research on gender and migration, as women who migrate as refugees or asylum seekers and those who are trafficked or forced to move for economic reasons make up a significant percentage of the total numbers. The feminisation of migration has been analysed (Cuban, 2010), as well as the role of gendered domination relations within migration paths (Trifanescu, 2015).

Starting approximately four decades ago, gender and migration scholarship has initially examined sex roles and sex differences. Gender was initially considered a dichotomous variable, until researchers started conceptualising it as a system of relations, "a fluid, multi-level set of practices embedded in social relations shaped by race / ethnicity, class, sexuality, and nationality" (Nawyn, 2010, p. 749). Subsequently, more complex gender analyses and theories were applied, including gender relation theory (Connell, 2002); sex-role theory (Hondagneu-Sotelo & Cranford, 2006); critical social theory (Silvey, 2004), and post-modern conceptions of gender (Parreñas, 2012).

The use made of the term gender does refer less and less to an individual-level binary category ascribed at birth but often indicates a system of power relations between the sexes, a normative and hierarchical system that determines the relative meaning of Femininity and Masculinity (Marro, 2010; Mathieu, 1991). A system that permeates every aspect of life, including the migration experience and relations among and with migrants,

The field has a strong interdisciplinary approach: sociologists, anthropologists, geographers, historians, psychologists and political scientists have analysed gender as a way of structuring power in all human relations, at micro and macro levels, at individual level, in families, communities, up to whole societies (Donato et al., 2006).

Gender has been considered as permeating "a variety of practices, identities, and institutions implicated in immigration" (Hondagneu-Sotelo, 2003, p. 9), making it a constitutive element of migration. However, attention has mainly been focused on gendered systems of relations in migrants' countries and cultures of origin, with less

the research is aimed at people for whom it is difficult to document qualifications, learning and skills acquired in non-formal and informal contexts, it is obvious that in this document the term "migrants" does not include highly-qualified migrants who have moved in a regular manner.



attention on the host countries' gendered systems of relations, which are not necessarily uniform across regions, classes and time.

RPL, migrants and gender

Recognition of Prior Learning (RPL) is the practice of reviewing, assessing and acknowledging the knowledge and skills gained by adults outside the formal education system. The current approach is aimed at shaping citizens who want to learn and take responsibility for their learning pathway with a view to becoming employable (Fejes, 2010). This has led the EU to instruct the Member States to implement national lifelong learning strategies, with particular emphasis on validating non-formal and informal learning as well. It is now accepted that the learning process may be informal, not only through lifelong learning but also through life wide learning, as life continually offers learning possibilities in contexts and situations not traditionally associated with it. Coffield (2000) describes informal learning as a submerged world which is more important than formal learning. Optimising migrants' entire skillset, not only what can be related to formal education, increases their awareness of their competences and helps guide them in their choices and employability. When a situated learning perspective is used to examine the validation of prior learning in specific contexts (Andersson & Fejes, 2010), the methodologies can be customised to suit migrants too. Migrants from less developed countries have knowledge which is often considered inferior, and the racialisation and genderisation of knowledge is particularly evident. The result is that particular occupations and particular countries are favoured by some immigration regimes (Grand & Szulkin, 2002; Guo & Shan, 2013; Williams, 2007). According to Andersson and Guo (2009), when validation consists mainly of a technocratic exercise and a governing tool, it is based on the use of excluding, normalising and dividing practices to obtain the desired selection results.

Shan and Fejes (2015) have considered migrants' skills and competencies as social and relational constructs capable of producing differences in their interactions with other social relations, but at the same time not challenging the power and practices of western countries. This perpetuates the hierarchical social order along axes of gender and race differences. Of particular interest when referring to the recognition of non-formal and informal learning and skills is the notion of soft skills. Soft skills refer to the "abilities, and traits that pertain to personality, attitude, and behaviour" (Moss & Tilly, 1996, p. 253), including the 'right' look and the 'right' sound (Nickson, Warhurst, & Dutton, 2005). Particularly important in the service economy, in which women are often overrepresented, the attention on soft skills favours the commodification of personal characteristics such as emotions, attitudes and even the way women dress and use make-up (Shan, 2015). Hierarchical social orders are thus perpetuated along axes of social differences, such as gender and race, by skills that are constructed by a dominant segment of the population. The essentialisation of women's work is often "seen as reflective of 'natural' talents or aptitudes" (Dunk,

1996, p. 105); as a result, jobs done primarily by women are considered less skilled than those done primarily by men (Leander, Phillips, & Taylor, 2010).

Aims and Questions of the study



The research described in these pages is part of a wider research activity within a Strategic Partnership for adult education, titled Synergies (2015–1-AT01-KA204), co-funded by the European Commission under the Erasmus+ program. The main goals of the gender-focused research activities were to gain a greater understanding of:

- The factors influencing the approach of volunteers and professionals assessing non-formal and informal learning and skills;
- The margin of freedom in suggesting which private or public training paths to follow;
- The formal and informal networks dealing with migrants in training and job-related issues;
- The interconnections among NGOs, public services and educational institutions dealing with migrant women.

Method. Data collection, participants and procedure

The research was based on a qualitative approach, through three strands allowing a data triangulation useful for validation purposes:

- Analysis, performed through desk research and 22 in-depth interviews with stakeholders, of education policies and training activities and previous projects planned by public bodies and organised by educational institutions, aimed specifically at migrants or including migrants in their target groups;
- In-depth interviews (12) to explore the approach of volunteers and professionals doing initial assessments and understand the various organisations' mission and vision. Lasting an average of seventy minutes, the in-depth interviews were carried out face-to face.
- Ethnographic observation in two NGOs and a Public Job Centre (72 hours in 4 months), and observation of 82 assessment interviews with migrant women (54) and men (28).

The ethnographic strand has been included since it “lends itself well to analysing gender as a dynamic concept, as it is easier to capture the dynamic nature of gender in ethnographic work than with the snapshots in time that survey data usually represent” (Nawyn, 2010, p. 760).

The research covered the period August 2016 – July 2017. The setting is a Metropolitan city of 854,099 inhabitants (01/01/2016) in Northern Italy.

Recruitment for the interviews was initiated using snowball sampling. NGOs and public and private organisations working in the Metropolitan city were contacted. Most organisations contacted agreed to be interviewed and two NGOs and a Public Job Centre subsequently allowed also the ethnographic observation of their activities.

A constructivist approach to grounded theory (Charmaz, 2006; Mills, Bonner, & Francis, 2006) was chosen as the analytical framework, incorporating constant comparative analysis as a method of qualitative data analysis. Notes from the observed meetings and initial assessment and documents collected during ethnographic observation were compared to the interviews. It then became possible to identify categories and subcategories in the material.

Migrant women in the settings observed

Before describing the research results, it is important to shortly describe the local situation, with some references to the regional and national Italian context. Women account for about 50% of migrants living in Italy: 52.6% of non-Italian residents. Most migrant women living in Italy follow training pathways and/or work in the domestic service and care sector, where demand has not been heavily influenced by the negative economic cycle. Of 100 non-Italian workers in the sector, 86.5% are women, representing 93.8% of family care assistants (Caritas, 2016).

In Italy, there are three main common practices of accommodating migrants: a nationwide approach (with thousands of different organisations); the protection system for asylum seekers and refugees (SPRAR²), with a network of entities providing reception projects for these target groups with the support of non-profit organisations and NGOs; and local integration of small groups of migrants. Regional sub-systems are structured in different ways, and involve a variety of stakeholders and institutional competences (Zanfrini, 2015). As a result the system does not produce stable action nets with a consolidated actor-network, such as that described by Fenwick and Edwards (2010).

The distribution of various nationalities varies widely across Italy. Overall, about 50% of migrants living in Italy are women, and the majority of certain nationalities is made up of women. Certain nationalities are concentrated in particular employment sectors, with some found more prevalently in the personal care, particularly domestic services (Maciotti & Pugliese, 2010). Due to this variability, only data about nationalities and employment sectors relative to the area where the research was carried out (Table 1), are included, a Metropolitan city in the Northwest of Italy hosting 52% of all residents of foreign origin in the entire region (approx. 136,000).

The main countries of origin are: Ecuador (24.5%), Albania (13.1%), Romania (11.4%), Morocco (8.3%), Peru (4%), Ukraine and the Chinese Republic (3.8% each).

2 Sistema di Protezione per Richiedenti Asilo e Rifugiati.

Table 1. Citizens of non-Italian origin resident in the Metropolitan City as of 1st January 2016 (ISTAT data _ <http://www.tuttitalia.it/>)

Men	Women	Total	%	% of the total population
32,322	38,430	70,752	51.9%	8.28%

Most migrant women living in Italy follow training pathways and/or work in the domestic service and care sector, where demand has only been influenced marginally by the negative economic cycle³.

The training paths required to work as a domestic worker or family care assistant are mainly informal, while the numerous non-formal courses organised at regional level are limited to the care sector, as a diploma is required for jobs in formal settings, such as the public and private nursing and elderly homes officially recognized by the health service.

The current absence of a single national qualification framework (NQF) aimed at reforming policy and practice on education, training and lifelong learning, along with individual regional registers of qualifications and training and professions evolving at different speeds, have all slowed down the validation and certification process for non-formal and informal learning. The Metropolitan City observed in the research described in this research is currently introducing more structured certification systems, which have not yet gone live. In the absence of formal Recognition of Prior Learning (RPL) procedures, the initial informal assessment of migrants' non-formal and informal learning and skills is often carried out by volunteers or professionals working for NGOs and by civil servants working for public job centres. This practice, aimed officially both at helping the person plan training and education paths and find a job, is still under-researched. Its influence on migrants' subsequent choices, in particular those of women, is therefore unclear.

Results

In the following pages I will explore from a gendered perspective how the initial assessment of migrants' non-formal and informal learning and skills is conducted in various settings, with a focus on NGOs, as migrants arriving in other settings have usually been assessed previously at least by an NGO. I will also describe how the ~~in-~~ ~~initial~~ assessment process is related to migration and education policies. Finally, I will focus on the differences in the approaches of NGOs and other institutions working with migrants.



3 The legal and illegal market for foreign female domestic workers in Italy has been characterised as a form of grey welfare. This paper focuses on the legal market; information and data collected on the illegal market have not been considered relevant enough to be included in the analysis, which focuses on the education and training sector. Further collection of data with different target groups will be necessary to complete the picture.

Initial assessment by NGOs and other organisations

NGO₁ is well-known throughout the city. It works at international and national level and has 38 branches throughout the metropolitan city. Its general activities consist of offering support and financial, social and organisational assistance to Italians and migrants in difficulty. Its activities for the poor and disadvantaged (both Italians and migrants) include an employment service which helps families (most of them affluent) recruit domestic staff. The branch dedicated to this activity is run by ten volunteers, seven women and three men, all over 60. New volunteers are trained on-the-job by more experienced volunteers. They come from the more affluent sectors of society, rather like the people who contact them in order to recruit staff. In this sense the initial interview is almost a job interview, since the job seekers – even more if migrants – are evaluated also on the basis of what they wear and how they behave; their skills are assessed verbally. In spite of the financial crisis, the employment service has around 120/130 job offers each year (the centre is open from September 1st to June 30th), a significant number compared to similar organisations. The availability of posts as butlers, gardeners, drivers and housekeepers, numerous in the past, has all but disappeared in recent years. The jobs on offer are now for caregivers or domestic workers, most of them live-in positions; the number of these female-dominated posts continues to expand. The organisation is religious in nature, volunteer meetings begin with a short prayer and frequent reference is made to the moral and ethical aspects of their work. Migrants are never asked about their religion, but when describing a potential family to candidates, mention is sometimes made of it:

“The lady is very religious, she says the rosary every afternoon. You know your prayers, don't you? If you say them with her, she'll be happy and everything will go smoothly” [Informal conversation between a volunteer and a migrant woman from South America _NGO₁#45iv].

The volunteers all speak at least some French and English, and use these languages when migrants do not speak enough Italian. The initial assessment interview establishing the relation between the NGO and the person (who will return on average once a month until she/he finds a job) is the same for Italians and migrants.

A highly detailed section on the employment assessment sheet – similar to those used by other services – is filled in to record availability and competences as a domestic worker or caregiver. Another section lists additional competences, including nurse/physiotherapist, seamstress, cook/baker/pastry-maker, gardener, painter/tiler, plumber, electrician, carpenter, labourer and ‘other’. This should make it possible to keep track of other competences which might be useful in the future. However, during the interviews observed these aspects were never considered: given the shortage and type of jobs on offer, filling in this section is considered a waste of time.

Among the questions, food preparation and housekeeping skills are considered most in-depth. The candidate may “fail” on their description of a recipe, or make mistakes when describing how to iron a shirt, clean carpets, wooden furniture or marble surfaces. However, candidates may give a good overall impression even if some of

their answers are not deemed correct; they are then told to improve their skills, and given detailed descriptions of what families look for. If migrants have poor language skills, they are encouraged to improve them since they have little chance of finding a job otherwise. The volunteers are aware of how hard the pre-selection process is, and wonder whether or not they should tell candidates about their shortcomings: they understand they are not necessarily objective, and in other contexts they might be sufficient, but they trust their knowledge of the requirements of families offering jobs. The volunteers are apparently unaware of how the meeting may influence the candidates in terms of shaping their expectations and the future investments they may make in learning or training paths. Everything is focused on the immediate task of finding a job.

The initial question, ‘What can you do?’, often summarises the entirety of the migrant’s past experiences. When migrant women, the vast majority of candidates, arrive for their interview, they have already heard via their personal networks that the only competence they will need (be it real or not) is the competence required for the jobs NGO₁ can offer, and they do not express other expectations. Volunteers sometimes ask candidates about their prior experiences, but even when they have formal competences – such as an engineering degree, as in the case of many women from Eastern Europe – they are told that unfortunately they will not be able to use their qualifications at all. Domestic work and care work in particular are often “seen as reflective of ‘natural’ talents or aptitudes” (Dunk, 1996, p. 105), from an essentialist perspective. However, domestic work is not considered naturally ‘women’s work’ by the volunteers. The volunteers have always had paid domestic staff at home, and their houses are not the type of places that can be cleaned and supervised by ‘no matter who’. They know that training is required to become a competent domestic worker, and they are generous in their explanations to candidates. A generation gap is perceived: “Young women today have always worked. They don’t know how to run a house, and they don’t have time to oversee staff. They therefore ask us to find women who are independent and know exactly what to do from the start, so sometimes they know more about keeping a house than their employer does” (Informal interview with a female volunteer at _NGO₁#8). The NGO₁ can offer this benefit to migrant women who do not yet have a personal network of clients: once you are considered suitable for the job by this NGO, you can use this informal recognition in other parts of the city, or wherever you go.

Caregiving competences are investigated to a lesser degree. In this case, references from previous Italian families are considered important, possibly from the same town. Mobile phone numbers are not accepted as references, only landline numbers, due to previous bad experiences in which a friend of the migrant woman was actually answering the phone. Caregiving jobs are most often for live-in workers. It is extremely difficult for younger women with small children – the majority of them migrants, as the local birth rate for Italian women is among the lowest in Italy – to provide this kind of availability, so older and childless women – migrants or natives alike – have a clear advantage.

The volunteers empathise with the candidates, treating natives and migrants alike, and they often point out how strict or absurd some of the families' requests are.

"The women they're looking for must be young, but not too young, strong so they can do heavy-duty work; they can't have children, a husband or a private life. They must have a driving licence, and must know how to swim so they can take the children to the beach. They must be slim, because if they are overweight people worry they'll eat too much and empty the fridge." [Informal interview with female volunteer_NGO1#5).

"Across the globe, the decline of manufacturing has led to an increasing presence of men of colour in reproductive labour. However, we should keep in mind that they mostly perform non-nurturant reproductive labour, in other words they are unlikely to provide care. Still, particular racial groupings of men are more likely to perform atypical gender work than others" (Parreñas, 2012, p. 272). The men who contact NGO1 already know that caregiving and cleaning jobs are the only ones on offer, and they adapt, glossing over other skills. Regardless of their ethnicity, natives and migrants all say they can do everything: not just cleaning work, but also caring for the elderly. The volunteers investigate men as they do for women candidates, and if they are satisfied with the results they will often put men forward for jobs. However, offers for caregiving and domestic jobs are received almost exclusively from women; when an elderly woman is unable to look for staff, her daughter or a female friend will step in rather than her husband. The volunteers say that their female clients do not want to have men around the house, regardless of their skills. It doesn't matter if the elderly person requiring care is a man, if he is heavily-built or aggressive due to a form of dementia: it is seen as safer to have a woman around the house, "preferably an Eastern European woman – they are tall and strong and more confident than South American women" [Informal interview with female volunteer_NGO1#7].

Low levels of education and a willingness to work all hours are seen as positives for all applicants, while, mainly for women migrants, clothing, make-up, hairpieces, 'the way they tie their babies on their back and bring them to work' (Informal interview with female volunteer NGO1#1) are all scrutinised and must be adapted in the name of the ultimate goal: finding a job.

The attention on soft skills favours the commodification of personal characteristics (Shan, 2015) as cultural and social differences are not considered: women must adhere to the requirements, and this will help them find a job. This maintains a ~~hi-~~
~~erarchical~~ social order, but the skills which affluent families seek out will widen migrants' employment chances in the future. Ethnographic observation of the local area and the line of people waiting outside the NGO1's office clearly reveal those women who have been coming to the NGO for some time or have already worked in the local area: they behave, talk and dress in a similar way to the families who have employed them (revealingly, people seeking new employment emphasise that they wish to stay in the local area and prefer to wait for a job to come up rather than moving to other neighbourhoods).



Cultural and social differences as well as differences in soft skills are viewed from another perspective in NGO2; it carries out some 9,000 interviews a year, around a third of which are initial assessment interviews. NGO2 is aimed at migrants only, and migrants who are closely integrated in Italian society work as consultants:

“The difficulties lie in the fact that the people who contact us have a different cleaning ‘culture’, or their approach to the families is different to what we’d expect... there are many subtleties which are obvious to Italians but not to migrants, even though they do know how to do their job. [Formal interview with male employee_NGO2#6i].”



Relevance of migration and education policies

In 2008, Italy and other EU Member States embarked on the process of referencing their national education qualifications (those issued by the State, Regions and Public Administration) to the European Qualification Framework (EQF). To date Italy still lacks a National Qualification Framework (NQF), and complexity remains both in terms of legislation and institutions: competences are in fact split between national and regional level both for education and vocational training.

Beyond NQFs, national immigration policies are the other mechanism influencing RPL. In Italy – immigration policies refer to the conditions and rights accorded to migrants (Hammar, 1985), therefore there is no selection of migrants on the basis of their skills: qualifications and competences are recognized once migrants are already in the country⁴. These policies are not gendered, as Harzig (2003) remarks: “Contemporary debate on immigration policy generally frames the issue in gender-neutral terms; this applies to legal propositions (entry status and citizenship), but also to concepts, which structure the subsequent settlement process. However, the neutrality makes the absence of gender even more conspicuous because what seems to be impartial affects men and women rather differently” (p. 35). There are around sixty local organisations assisting migrants on an informal basis in the metropolitan area observed, many of them NGOs. Some work with a few dozen people, others with hundreds. Some only give out information, others organise training courses. However, immigration and education policies influence the initial assessments, no matter if the organisation carrying them out is private or public, profit or non-profit. At the start of the assessment interview candidate’s personal data are recorded (as shown on their identity document) and their residency permit is always checked, in the absence of which the interview will not continue⁵.



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- 4 Another possibility is represented by *Immigration control policies* that control the admission of foreign citizens, for example by requiring them to have specific qualifications or competences.
 - 5 All the organisations observed – public as well as private, NGOs or profit – can only deal with migrants aged over 18 who already have a residency and work permit. It is illegal to

The interviewees who work for public Job Centres were all familiar with the concepts of lifelong learning and recognising formal competences. Some had taken part in pilot projects designed to promote RPL. NGO volunteers often asked for clarifications, not recognising the terminology, and on receiving further explanations, they all said that the matter always comes up informally in interviews. For-profit organisations running training courses (in general open to natives and migrants as well) are among the best prepared in this sense, although the training they offer is limited to two areas: building work and health workers (with the focus on the latter). There are no women trainees on the building work courses, but some men do train to become health workers. They are still in the minority, and they are older in age.⁶ The training for health care workers, both theoretical and practical, lasts around a year and costs between 2,000 and 3,500 Euros. However, there are many care homes for the elderly in the local area so it is not difficult to find a job. Occupational segregation is still much in evidence, although it is beginning to diversify. Home caregivers are almost exclusively women, while some men are now finding work as health workers in care and nursing homes. There is always demand from care and nursing homes, and the contractual conditions offer greater employee rights than those for home caregivers.

Unlike other Italian regions, courses in home economics are not available in the area observed, so the only way for domestic workers to improve their skills is through experience. This is one of the reasons for NGO's good reputation: working for its clientele makes it easier for candidates to find jobs in the future, since they will have gained experience in some of the most exclusive areas of the city, in the most difficult houses to clean, and they will have good references.

As noted previously, NGOs gather very little information on candidates' ~~non-formal~~ and informal learning and skills beyond those needed for the jobs required. Volunteers do not consider training courses of any use:

"Many of the [migrant] women cannot afford to pay for the training courses, and they take a long time to complete, so they have to do jobs here and there to get by. There is no demand for people with diplomas, because employers know that they would ask for higher pay. Many of the Eastern European women have degrees, but the South American women have no qualifications. On the contrary, we see a degree as a sign of commitment and willingness to learn, and we know that women graduates will learn quickly even if they have never worked as domestic workers. Ignorance leads to aggression and presumption. In the past people would employ Italian young women with no qualification, but now they start to understand that educated workers can 'use their heads'" [Interview with a male volunteer _NGO1#9]. However, as can be seen, all previous pathways, in profit or non-profit, public and private organisations, currently lead back only to the two types of job on offer.

give a job to a person without a work permit. Other organisations in the Metropolitan city take care of migrants aged below 18 and help migrants in obtaining a residency permit.

6 Younger migrant men and women who have completed their high school education prefer to try to enrol on university nursing courses.

Lack of networks but a variety of organisations

Since the different public and private, profit and non-profit organisations involved in the research do not collaborate in a structured network, the connections observed were often between individuals working for different organisations who know each other and occasionally use their personal informal network to create useful contacts for individuals. The same migrant may be evaluated at an initial assessment interview several times by different organisations. She or he will decide whether or not to say if she or he has already accessed other services.

In almost all of the cases observed, nothing was asked about the migrants' network of relations. Migrants contact a large number of organisations, including the trade unions, which play a key role in defending their rights, not to mention the informal networks created through interaction with other migrants or Italians. Social contacts have been consistently considered a strong determinant of out-migration (De Jong, 2000; Donato, 1993; Massey & Espinosa, 1997), but social contacts in the arrival country can also be useful in determining personal and professional progression. For example, families who are satisfied with the care given to an elderly relative or with domestic work can be a powerful springboard for migrant women. Word of mouth is more important than selection by any organisation, NGO, private or public service.

The web of personal and organisational relations, combined with the rise in unemployment across the native population, has led to a levelling out of salaries. The time when migrant female migrants tended "to be deployed in a narrow range of occupations shunned by the local female population" (Truong, 1996, p. 28) has long gone. While many migrant women would once accept whatever they were offered, the natives and migrants observed in interviews and informal conversations all asked for 10 Euros an hour, with reductions for a greater number of hours. The real difference is that native Italian women are not prepared to take jobs as live-in care workers, since nearly all of them have a home and family of their own.

The enactment of the assessment is slightly different in each organisation, and it would require little effort to use the collected data as a starting point for future validations in view of more formal RPL activities. But this does not occur, and migrants are expected to continue doing the job they initially said they were able to do, possibly with a greater level of competence. The only jobs available for adult migrants (in particular women) are domestic work and caregiving, regardless of their interests, skills or desires. For NGO₁, this means learning working methods and techniques, while NGO₂ instils in migrants the importance of understanding the differences between their culture and the new culture they are experiencing. It is difficult to evoke the issue of work segregation according to the sex of the migrants, as all the interviewees' talk of the two or three types of jobs available as an inevitable outcome. They are all the city has to offer, there are very few jobs and a large number of candidates; changing their approach to assessment, filtering and selecting candidates is considered a complete waste of time by all the volunteers. Migrant men and women

are seen as suppliers of work, and their individuality comes second to what everyone sees as the main priority, in their interest above all: finding a job.

The situation is different as regards public employment services. Most consultants working in these settings have significant knowledge of many job sectors, and they have much wider experience than the volunteers. Once again, however, any evaluation of prior non-formal and informal learning or skills is strictly limited by an awareness of what the labour and professional training markets currently offer, and the variety of services provided by other organisations such as the NGOs is not well-known enough to be of any use.

According to Parreñas (2008), women migrate from one patriarchal system to another and this also has positive repercussions: they may find new barriers to autonomy in the host country, but also new opportunities and new ways to negotiate additional power. Similarly, there is an upside to the observed lack of coordination between organisations. Candidates can reinvent themselves at every interview, and skills which have no value for some organisations can become a deciding factor for others since there are no common formal procedures and pathways and no passage of information. If this is not possible with NGOs, as the choices offered are very limited, when the passage is made towards public job centres, the lessons learnt in previous experiences may be useful in opening new paths. Another positive change lies in new family-based arrangements, linked to the fact that it is more difficult for men to find jobs. Younger migrant women sometimes bring their husbands and children along to the initial assessment, saying that they have reached an agreement with their husband because women are more likely to find a permanent job. The women are prepared to become live-in caregivers for the elderly, visiting their husbands and children in their time off, while their husbands take over responsibility for their homes and children.

The main problem mentioned by all those interviewed is that many migrants lack sufficient language skills. All the organisations interviewed urge migrants to learn Italian. However, while the NGOs see the goal as enabling workers to interact better with their employees, the public services consider it a means of integration and offer language courses. All those interviewed feel that migrant women who do not speak good Italian will face greater problems if they have children. Helping children with their school work, talking to teachers and interacting with other parents is once again seen as a woman's responsibility.

Discussion

In this paper, I have examined the role of a variety of individuals and organisations in the informal assessment of migrants' prior non-formal and informal learning and skills, contextualising it in a wider system of relations and organisations within the same local area, which share the same legal, educational and training framework.

The research contributes to existing literature on gender, migration and adult education in a number of ways. It views the role of the first assessment not as a neutral

activity aimed merely at collecting candidates' data for jobs, training or learning, independently from their sex, but as a significant moment in which their expectations and prior experiences can be reshaped. This reshaping is influenced, albeit not exclusively, by a gendered perception of society, education and the job market, where men and women are assigned roles and duties according to their sex, thus influencing migrants' future learning and working process in a cascade effect.

Firstly, although it has previously been argued that employers seeking domestic care workers (Hondagneu-Sotelo, 2001; Lan, 2006) show preferences for immigrant women as a more exploitable source of labour than men or native-born women, little attention has been paid to how such preferences may change in time. When the economic crisis starts to affect the native population, the differences between native-born people and migrants fade away and the same services and possibilities are offered to both groups. However, what does not change is the preference for women over men, based on criteria such as safety issues and not skills and competencies: this shows the importance of intersecting the potential ground for discrimination in future studies. If class, gender and ethnicity may be considered primary social divisions (Anthias, 2001), the symbolic hierarchies and material inequalities on which they are based change in time and space, favouring migrant women who grasp the changes. If "class is not an economic relation *per se*" (Anthias, 2001, p. 846), and economic aspects help shape the local situation, migrants who are able to adapt their appearance and behaviour so that they are chosen to accompany "better-off" elderly women around the local area as well as taking care of them will build up a social and cultural capital for the future.

In this research, I have analysed how the role of the volunteer is enacted in the assessment session, based on the values and mission of the NGOs. These may be different, leading to different results. I have also analysed how the initial impact can transfer gendered perspectives to family or social relations. The study thus contributes towards our understanding of the dynamics involved when the first assessment is done in isolation, with a short-term view of the migrant's future and without networking with other organisations which focus on different aspects. These may include helping people find educational and training courses and supporting their professional growth. The importance of creating formal networks which harmonise the solutions and perspectives offered to migrants emerges clearly from the situations observed.

This research looks at a number of organisations situated in a particular regional context and their everyday informal practices in assessing informal prior competencies. It may be considered a limitation, but the lack of nationwide coordination for migrant-focused RPL initiatives is common to several European countries. An analysis of the processes occurring in other organisations might therefore create a patchwork effect useful at a wider level.

Furthermore, the study supports previous research highlighting the importance of distinguishing between care work and reproductive labour, as "a theoretical focus on [care] privileges the experiences of white women and excludes large numbers of

very-low-wage-workers” (Duffy, 2005, p. 79). Reproductive labour entails a wider array of activities than care work and focusing on it helps us pinpoint racial inequalities among care providers and care recipients (Parreñas, 2012). The research shows how care work is no longer a privilege of “white women” (Duffy, 2005), and migrants use and spend the competences and skills acquired in previous work and in their private lives, caring for their children or elderly family members. Employers and employees alike very often belong to multigenerational families.

Other research has investigated a shift in contemporary society in which men are now starting to employ migrant carers, thus withdrawing from the “dirty work” and reproducing hegemonic masculinity (Gallo & Scrinzi, 2016). In the contexts observed this phenomenon is still minimal, as it is mostly female personal networks which are activated when the need for personal care arises. However, another shift is occurring, with men offering the same domestic work or caregiving competences as migrant women but being refused because of their sex. However, this new availability towards what were once predominantly female sectors has led to greater numbers of male care workers in nursing homes, a better paid and more stable job.

Globally, the research shows some of the profound challenges involved in the informal assessment of prior non-formal and informal learning and skills, at three levels. The first level concerns migration and education policies, often (nominally) gender-blind or female-centred. In the first case they are also blind to gender changes with evolving social contexts, in the second they help perpetuate work segregation while still influencing the final outcome of any assessment. The second level is the local reality, consisting of two main aspects: employment prospects which maintain extensive job segregation, and intermediary organisations which are not organised in networks and do not communicate with each other. The third level is individual, where the concrete exchange of information among interviewers and individuals occurs. Much is said here about the local context, its preferences and its requirements, mainly within NGOs. Mediated by a personal vision of society and relations, this information is gendered in the sense that traditional relations between men and women appear unmoveable and are easily perpetuated by migrant women's wish to adapt in order to find a job.

This research is only a first step towards a greater exploration of the role of NGOs and other informal organisations in assessing non-formal and informal prior learning and skills. It focuses on one local situation in an Italian region, analysing the complex net of organisations working in tandem with NGOs – often the first local contact point for job seekers, but not creating stable networks. Further studies are therefore needed to ascertain how the role of those carrying out the assessments is shaped by the NGO's mission and vision and by personal views, both in other assessment settings and in different national contexts.

Concluding remarks

The picture that emerges from the data analysis is highly fragmented, reflecting the lack of coordination at a local level. Tensions between migration and education policies, often lacking a gendered vision, and the vision and mission of NGOs and educational institutions working with migrants, mean that little attention has yet been paid to an approach to assessing migrant women's non-formal and informal learning and skills that pays attention to gender, in terms of power relations at local level but also in the migrants' networks.

The fact that the majority of migrants accessing the NGO services observed are women gives the assessment consultants the false impression that "gender", meant as the person's sex, is not an issue in their case, as they actually help a majority of women find a job or plan future training. In this way the volunteers focus on gender as a binary category and miss the opportunity to reflect on gender as a system of power relations between the sexes, in which migrants and themselves are embedded. For organisations involved in the assessment of migrants' non-formal and informal learning and skills, the time has come to introduce training activities to help promote an understanding that gender is "relational and contextual, power-laden and also dynamic" (Donato et al., 2006, p. 13).

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