

TRANSFERRED MOTHERHOOD: LIFE EXPERIENCES OF LATIN AMERICAN
MOTHERS IN ITALY

By

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This thesis is dedicated to all migrant women.

For the rest of your life
there'll be two sets of voices—
those in the street
and those in your head.
When they meet you'll be “at home.” (How quickly
your children learn another tongue)
—Peter Bland, 1991

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This is a qualitative inquiry of first-person events of migrant mothers in Italy. From a feminist-postmodern approach, I conducted participatory in-depth interviews of ten Latin American migrant mothers with school-age children. This thesis brings attention to one particular aspect of migrant women, motherhood, giving a more adequate representation of them and of some of their particular issues.

Starting from the observation that under strenuous situations – such as the cultural transition – mothers relocate themselves in a new setting and balance their relationships finding alternative ways to reconstruct satisfactory interactions with their children, my aim was to develop and explore the concept of “transferred motherhood.” This concept describes how mothers and children interact in the host society, taking into account changes in the family performance, conflicts in the new setting, and strategies that mothers devise to create harmony and wellbeing for their families. “Transferred motherhood” emerges as both a framework and a topic of study.

CHAPTER 1 INTRODUCTION

Everybody visiting Rome should pass by the church of Santa Maria degli Angeli, a beautiful 15th century building situated just behind Termini train station. That place becomes even more interesting on Thursday afternoons and late Sunday mornings, when its picture changes vividly: if you go to the backyard of the church on those days, you will find the unexpected panorama of hundreds of Latin American immigrants. Some of them are selling food, ice-cream, or drinks; but most of them are just talking to each other. The priest of the church is upset with them: they know they cannot sell anything inside the church's property. However, this does not seem to be a problem for those "guests," who continue gathering there twice a week instead of on the street.

Talking to these people, I came to know that Thursdays and Sundays are days when migrants working as housekeepers, nannies, or elderly caretakers have part of their day off. Just few hours per week are enough for meeting other people from the same hometown, city, or nation they come from; to exchange news, and to give packages to those who are leaving to take to relatives back home.

These encounters around Santa Maria degli Angeli are an opportunity to create social networks among immigrants. The casual encounters are occasions to find new jobs or accommodations by word of mouth. By the same token, immigrants exchange information about how to obtain visas and *permesso di soggiorno* (equivalent to the US green card), how to travel cheaper, where to find special or ethnic foods, and which doctors or hospitals provide better care to their patients without asking for "papers." The

Thursday and Sunday meetings fill the need for social services, by creating an unofficial “information center” where immigrants can speak their own language, and where many of them do not need to expose themselves to the consequences of disclosing their legal status as unauthorized aliens. People from different cultural backgrounds, countries, ethnicities, races, and gender do not have to deal with their being foreigners. Finally but not less importantly, they face each other with none of the sense of powerlessness that characterizes most of their everyday-life encounters. However, it would be a mistake to standardize the people who gather around Santa Maria degli Angeli under the universal category of migrants. In fact, many of them face different situations: immigrants are not a homogeneous group of people experiencing the same thing in the same way. For example, while immigrant men’s problems are similar to those of immigrant women, women must in addition deal with the added social vulnerability of their gender; sexual harassment; and other burdens, motherhood among them.

The classical interaction of personal and structural variables in the study of migration has been enriched by recent considerations of gender, race, and class; and also by policies or political agendas. Just a few decades ago, migration started to be studied as a multifaceted subject characterized by correlated factors that inform the immigrants’ adaptation and assimilation to their new society.

In general I consider gender to be one of the most motivating areas of study, for its potential to challenge established theoretical frameworks, and its potential to open international migration to the exploration of events and processes neglected until now. By making women and their experiences the core of this study, I attempt to shed light on crucial questions about generational-family issues, continuity-discontinuity of traditional

gender roles in the new setting, and sex discrimination. This is not to say that these problems do not relate to men; but traditional and mainstream studies of migration have been male-centered, neglecting to address the private sphere of women.

My study aspires to show the importance of adding the variable of motherhood into the feminist discourse of migration in order to cover one of the most universal roles that women of all status (freely or not, intentionally or not) acquire and face around the world. This topic is explored and elaborated in the specific context of Italian society, which has historically been a producer (not a receiver) of immigrants.

Gender, Race, and Migration

It is easy to recognize (at first glance) that most immigrants who meet around Santa Maria degli Angeli and other parts of the city are women. Many have children with them; some (a few) are there with their partners. It is striking to observe that migration is no longer a phenomenon in which women are the minority or a hidden population. Migration is increasingly becoming a female event.

As many women as men leave their home countries to resettle somewhere else, but women's migratory circumstances seem to be greatly influenced by their gender. Regardless of their immigration status, women confront their personal histories with the cultural, social, and political situation of the new setting. Problems of class and race may arise for the first time in their lives. Moreover, even if women actively contribute to national and family economies, they still face gender discrimination in Western societies (Buijs, 1993), both within and outside the family context.

Most of the Latin American migrant women in Italy are from Peru, Ecuador, and the Dominican Republic; but there is also an important contingent of Colombians, Bolivians, and Argentineans. More often than not, migrant women from Latin America

are multiracial and multiethnic, making their unequivocal classifications practically impossible. In their native rounds, indigenous, white, and black populations share the territory with the consequent mixture. Women with diverse features have trouble passing unnoticed in a country where nonwhite populations are still marginal and relatively small minorities. In Italy, migrant women meet a traditional white society with little experience on multicultural issues. Only in the last 5 years have racial minorities started to become more visible in urban areas. Nevertheless, segregation based on skin color, race, religion, or nationality is still common.

Women, already a minority per se, must face discrimination in multiple levels of their public and private life; but in the new societies, they must also deal with discrimination based on race, culture, religion, language, nationality, and ethnicity (Berry, 1997). Intolerance on the grounds of racial difference is probably the strongest and most manifest of discriminations in many societies. People of color are a visible minority, and women of other races carry out social prejudices and sexual myths attached to their race. For example, black Latinas or “mulatas” tend to be considered by some Italian men as “calientes” and sexually promiscuous. Because of this assumption, black Latina women are more likely to be the object of disrespectful sexual approaches than Italian women, even to the point of sexual harassment. Although immigrant men have to deal with discrimination too, women are usually particularly vulnerable and exposed targets. Their opportunities to find jobs in the new setting may increase compared with their home countries; however, usually these jobs offer low salaries, no benefits, and very poor working conditions compared to the general population of the host country and the average male immigrant population from the same country of origin.

Migrant women also experience contradictory class mobility. On the one hand, their social status in their country of origin may rise because of the remittances they sent home, and because of the social constructions and considerations of them as emigrant workers. In the new setting, however, standard domestic or manufacturing jobs locate immigrant workers among the lowest socio-economic strata. This is a direct consequence of migrant women's perpetuation of domestic work, which from a political and social perspective is considered a marginal sector of the job market (Andall, 2000a).

The particular situation of migrant women justifies the special attention that social sciences and immigration studies may pay to gender. Theories and inquiries about migration need to consider feminization of the migratory experience by analyzing its distinctive aspects, in order to anticipate and plan consequent interventions. Because of this, my study focuses on gender and migration, with special attention to the personal experiences and accounts of migrant women who are mothers.

Migration and Motherhood

Despite the reciprocal accommodation between migrants and the receiving societies, newcomers face more significant challenges in their daily lives. Migrants in the new environment must find new roles for themselves, and readjust their family relationships to the new milieu (Handlin, 1973; Zlotnik, 1995). Because of the deep-rooted consideration of women as the family's main caretaker, mothers struggle to balance their cultural uses and traditions as mothers, wives, and women with the customs and rules of the host society.

Women have a key role in resettling their families (covering duties, emotions, and tasks that, generally speaking, usually see men as protagonists). In many cases, migrant women travel alone; their children will join them at a later point, once the basic needs

have been taken care of. In other cases, mothers decide to start their “adventure” with their kids. In any case, in the new setting, women who incorporate to the labor market are still responsible for childcare and domestic labor, therefore; simultaneously experiencing a double adaptive stress: as individuals and as mothers (Schechter, 1998; Liamputtong, 2001).

Frequently, migrant mothers have the responsibility of dealing with specific family issues such as their children’s health care and school. Especially at the beginning, they find themselves isolated in a new society with different values, language, and norms (Chell-Robinson, 2000). On the one hand, they do not have the traditional support that the extended family and friends usually provided in the home country. On the other hand, the lack of information on available resources makes mothers’ access to different support systems a tortuous and long process, which often does not satisfy their immediate needs. By talking to these women, I realized that apparently simple things (such as buying children’s food or medications) become a source of stress because they do not speak Italian and do not find in the market the same products that they consumed in their home countries.

Probably, the most significant challenge that migrant mothers cope with is the social reconstruction of their mother identities and their traditional roles within the family in a foreign country. There are two main issues in this situation. The first one is separation: many Latin American mothers leave their children behind with the hope of bringing them to Italy in the near future. Many of them wait until 3 or 4 years before seeing their children again. During this period, the children live without their mothers

and, as we can easily imagine, it must not be easy for them to move to a new country to live with an almost unknown mother.

Mothers who are in the host country with their kids also face the stress of risking a certain degree of losing or switching the power relationship between them. Children use to learn Italian easier and better than their parents. They are more easily involved in and part of the new social context, which is very different from their home countries'. Some of these migrant children help their mothers with translations and assume positions that mothers often interpret as disrespectful. Mothers must find alternative ways of parenting in order to develop, or regain satisfactory relationships with their children.

Social researchers need to remember that the family is very often experienced as a safe and nurturing haven from the dominant culture. This private sphere therefore plays a central role in the processes of adaptation and identity development.

Family life and motherhood have to be emphasized in migrant policies and the studies dealing to them. Within a framework of intersectional variables involving gender and immigration, it is important to consider migration's positive and negative effects on has on the family structure. On the one hand, migration for some women represents incorporation into the labor market outside home, which may embody the independence of women from men, and the empowerment of female decisions over the classical patriarchy experienced at home. Migrant working women can improve their position in the family hierarchy and improve the status of their close relatives. On the other hand, migration may also highlight even more the traditional subjugation of women in long-established family structures, uses, and cultures.

Besides providing indispensable information to social services, migrant mothers can also be active participants in prevention, intervention assistance, and support. As a matter of fact, in Italy and in other European countries many immigrant children face discriminatory barriers to success in their host societies. At the same time, political and organizational spheres are deaf to mothers' voices. To a certain extent, social and scholastic interventions on children and women fall far behind their realities.

The Italian Context

Many countries in Western Europe have moved from industrial based economies to service-industry based economies with the consequent need of cheap and unspecialized labor. As a consequence, new migration dynamics included the transformation of traditionally sending communities into receiving groups. At the same time, the European processes of monetary integration and the single, open market created the need for new solutions to deal with lack of "low" labor forces, one of the spillover effects of integration. Besides, the new labor markets and the demands of the global economy influenced the migration flow. Simultaneously, the poverty of countries based on peripheral (dependent) economies as well as the presence of armed conflicts, corruption, and political instability contribute to the decisions of people to migrate. In turn, this massive migratory movement modifies the political, economic, and traditional social structures of both European countries (Baldwin-Edwards & Arango, 1999; Geddes & Favell, 1999) and the sending nations (Chell-Robinson, 2000).

Although migration around the world has increased in the last two decades, migration to other regions or countries has been present throughout all human history. However, the latest migratory movement is exceptional because of the massive number of people participating in the process. This is the case of Italy, where this research was

conducted, and which in recent years, along with other European countries, has become a major destination of Latin American migration. The growing population around Santa Maria degli Angeli is changing the city, and this is not the only example, many other churches and associations are based on the Latin American presence.

Working women, including those who work at home in the host country, also represent an important thrust for the economic development of the home and the host country (Barsotti & Lacchini, 1995). However, as Italian social services and national policies tend to consider migrant women a secondary population, they often remain invisible.

A number of factors contribute to the host society's perception of migrant women as non-valuable for the national economy and to the consequently low salary they have. Among these factors are: their jobs are often not regulated by the authorities; migrants do not join unions; they legally depend on sponsor employers; and the most relevant, domestic service (that many immigrant do) have historically been considered low level occupations. In other words, even if migrant women's economic and social situation is usually better than in their home countries, it is still far worse than for the average working woman in Italy.

Domestic service reproduces a class hierarchy and patterns of male domination. Italian employers prefer migrant workers because they are paid less. Also, migrant workers accept hard, unhealthy, or demanding jobs that Italians usually reject. Especially in domestic service, the working conditions changed from being hourly-paid, as it used to be for Italian women, to being paid as live-in help, which nowadays is the most common modality of employment for female migrants arriving in Italy (Andall, 2000b). Migrants

working under these circumstances are constrained to work all day long, with only few hours off during the whole week. Because of these exploitative working conditions, migrant women do not represent a real competition for native working women. In addition, they are usually discounted or degraded as unskilled and not indispensable workers. Italian institutions forget that thanks to the incorporation of migrant workers in domestic labor, many Italian women have been able to increase their presence and status in the national economy.

Conclusion

The major challenge of my study was to bring attention to one particular aspect of migrant women – motherhood – by giving a more adequate representation of them and of some of their particular issues. I focus on the understanding of some aspects of these women's life experiences through their first-person accounts, giving to women's voices the importance they deserve as experts of their own situation. The application of a feminist approach to the study of motherhood and migration helps to conceptualize women's positions within the family before and after the relocation in the new setting, shedding light on aspects of gender inequality.

To finish this introductory overview about Latin American migrant mothers living in Italy I would like to stress the standpoint theory of this thesis: under strenuous situations, such as the cultural transition, mothers relocate themselves in the new setting and balance their relationships finding alternative ways to reconstruct satisfactory relationships with their children. This adjustment, however, occurs after a period of instability, dilemmas, and negotiations of traditional family roles.

The main goals of my study were as follows:

- To examine how Latin American migrant women in Italy redefine their motherhood in their new surroundings
- To contribute to the understanding of these women's experience
- To improve the quality of life of Latin American mothers and their children in Italy

These objectives were explored by giving space to women's voices in relation to the reconfiguration of their gender roles within the family after migration. Women were asked to compare and contrast their experiences and expectations of being a mother in Italy in opposition to those they held at their country of origin. This research also describes the readjustment process that mothers undergo during the transition.

Chapter 5 develops the concept of "transferred motherhood" which, unlike "transnational motherhood" focuses on mother/children issues as well as social reconstructions of family roles during the transition or adaptation period in the new setting.

CHAPTER 2 LITERATURE REVIEW

Just few studies compare the experiences of mothering before and after migration. None of them addresses the specific problems of reconstructing relationships between mothers and children in the new setting. As we will see, many variables should be considered in the study of migration and motherhood. The complexity of the issue and its originality for the field of social sciences make it necessary to review multiple theories on migration, gender and family as well as the particular immigrant context of Italy. The main point of this literature review is to provide a better understanding of migrant mothers' experiences by drawing upon previous studies in order to elaborate a new theory.

General International Migration Theories

As many theorists agree, no theory of international migration rises to the status of being distinctively explanatory (Massey et al; 1993; Arango, 2000). In fact, the field is characterized by “only a fragmented set of theories that have developed largely in isolation from one another, sometimes but not always segmented by disciplinary boundaries” (Massey et al., 1993, p. 432).

Classical migration theories have considered this subject from an ungendered point of view, focusing on the analysis of different factors such as the economic or the labor market. For example, Marxist approaches consider immigration as part of the capitalist development in which immigrant workers serve the interests of the bourgeoisie (Marx,

1957; Castells, 1975; Miles 1987). Neo-Marxist theories, instead, focus primarily on the world market structure and its influence over migration trends (Portes & Walton, 1981).

Lewis (1954), supported by Ranis and Fei (1961), developed the so called neo-classical theory according to which international migration is understood as a consequence of poor countries' response to the demand of high-capital countries for labor supply. This is a macro perspective that considers the labor market the main factor forcing the international flow. Within the same neo-classical theory, but from a micro-level perspective, different authors as Todaro (1969) and Todaro and Maruzsko (1987) relate migration not only to the differences between countries in their job offer and demand, but also to differences in earnings and employment rates. That is, individuals migrate because of prospective improvements of their lives. Migrants, in this case, evaluate their human capital and decide to move if the cost of migration is considered lower than the earnings of it.

Recently, new approaches to immigration have considered the "new economics of migration" (Massey et al., 1993), in which the decision to migrate does not depend on just one person, but relates a group of people, usually the family. In this case, migration is considered as a way to increase income as well as a prevention of poverty in countries with economic instability. Therefore, one or more family members move abroad and send remittances back home. In this way, household financial systems have more than one source to guarantee the family income even with weak local economy or labor market (Stark & Levhari, 1982; Taylor, 1986).

Portes and Halto (1981) and Castells (1985) among others, work on a different hypothesis about the origin of international migration, the world system theory. Their

point of view, previously developed by Raúl Prebisch (a great Latin American economist) in 1959 about the economic sector, maintains that migration is the consequence of a world market that is structured in capitalist countries that penetrate in the economy of peripheral or less developed societies. This international division of the labor market allows industrial nation states to invest in countries with agriculture-based economy by taking advantage of low wages and, at the same time, finding new markets for their products. Furthermore, this incursion of foreign capital limits men's opportunities to work so they are forced to migrate. Massey illustrates this process:

“Much of the labor demand is female, however and the resulting feminization of the work place limits opportunities for men (...) The insertion of foreign-owned factories into peripheral regions thus undermines the peasant economy by producing goods that compete by those made locally; by feminizing the work place without providing factory-based employment opportunities for men; and by socializing women for industrial work and modern consumption, albeit without providing a lifetime income capable of meeting these needs.” (Massey et al. pp. 445-446)

Besides the contribution to the study of migration, the models so far described focus more on structural and economical causes of migration and push/pull factors of sending and receiving societies than in the personal motivations of the migrants. Furthermore, these major contemporary migration theories were developed basically in order to understand and predict the migration flows, but not with the concrete goal of improving life conditions of migrants who already lived on the developed nations.

Probably the most important feminist critique is that these migration approaches took for granted that migration was basically a question of male workers, while women were incorporated within the process as part of the family following them. Even in the world system approach, gender variables are introduced only to explain men's reasons to move.

The contribution of these theories to our understanding of this complex phenomenon it is evident, but it is also important to recognize their gaps in four important aspects. First, these theories consider immigrants as secondary actors that react to external causes. Second, they all have stereotypical characterizations of migration as homogeneously male, with the subordinated presence of women playing minor roles of contributors or dependent subjects. Third, as no other variable besides race or culture is identified, migration seems reduced to a standardized phenomenon that reproduces the same patterns independently from geographical, historical, and demographic contexts. Finally, traditional theories fail to address the experiences of migrants as well as their personal narratives, which are usually considered insufficient to explain the general life situation of the participants.

In summary, these theories do not address the analysis of motherhood's role in migration. In recent years, several scholars explicitly started to pay attention to the variable of gender in the study of migration. Thanks to the involvement of modern feminist theories, the migration paradigm incorporates women, among other variables, to the study of international relocation. By attributing a large significance to private spheres and to women's personal stories, contemporary research investigations not only predict migrant flows and their economic repercussions but also expose an unknown reality of many western societies and denounce abusive or mistreating situations.

Integrating Gender Discourse into Migration Theories

Kelson and Delaet (1999) strongly support the need to include women in the migration discourse even if this makes the study of international migration even more complex. In fact, in order to make women more visible, different intersectional variables as race, national identity, and class have to be also considered. Only in this way, the

authors affirm, will be possible to reach a general understanding of the complex and sometimes contradictory process of migration.

The invisibility of women in the migration process has been discussed by numerous social researches in the last decades (Morokvasic 1983, 1984; Pessar, 1995; Andall, 2000a) Historically women have migrated as much as men, but they have been considered non-active participants of the migration process (Barsotti & Lacchini, 1995). One of the first sociologists to criticize this view was Mirjana Morokvasic, who in the early 1980s wrote several articles on gender and migration in Europe. She enormously contributed to the development of a critical approach against the standardized male reductionism of classical migration theories. In her article “Birds of passage are also women...” (1984) Morokvasic exposes the possible causes why women decide to migrate, arriving to the conclusion that, contrary to many inquiries, economic factors or family reunification were not the only reasons for moving. In her opinion, personal factors are also carefully considered in this decision: patriarchal liberation, family violence, unhappy marriages or the response to a marginalized position in the society of origin and its consequent lack of opportunities are some of the relevant aspects considered. To this point, and as I consider that many women, even in underdeveloped countries want to participate in the public sphere, and actively fight for this right, political persecution and lack of ideological or religious freedom need to be added to this list. Moreover, Lin (1995) considers individual characteristics and personalities as a third aspect to be included to the macro-structural context and family organization. Consequently, the combination of these three factors influences whether or not migration is a family or a personal decision.

In addition to the reasons for women's move described above, Woo (2000) proposed a theory on female migration involving two factors: on the one hand women life cycles, which are characterized by different priorities such as studies, migration, marriage, and work. On the other hand, subordination cycles, which depend on women's role within the family, such as mother, wife, daughter, etc. Accordingly, structural causes interrelating the combination of these two dynamic phases convince women's to migrate.

Gruner-Domic (2000) focused on migrant women's self-perceptions and their situation as foreign workers in Europe. Through biographical narrative analyses the author explores how Latin American immigrants portray themselves and their attitudes toward the new society individuating five different strategies:

- Accepting differences between her and others
- Adapting to others or assimilation
- Opposing to others
- Intent to achieve respect in both societies
- Identifying themselves within the group of Latin American women.

Women may adopt one or more of these positions depending on their personal situation and time.

Sarah England (1998; 1999) in her studies about the Garifuna Diaspora concludes that "deterritorialization of power has led to the reterritorialization of identities" (1999:32) and that even if gender relationships within the family are characterized by patriarchal subordination, the migration process may help to break this pattern of interaction between men and women. Women have, under this perspective, a special relevance for the reproduction of culture in the new setting. Consequently they are

viewed as the most direct link with old traditions and uses; their function is considered vital for the survival of their culture and men's perception of women's role in the family.

As England does, many other authors assert also that the transnational construction of gender and the change of women's roles within the family is influenced by the combination of the particular background of each family and the culture of the new space (Kibria, 1990; Zlotnik, 1995). Fournon and Glick Schiller (2001) explore the ways in which gender and nation, the personal and the political, define each other and how the experience of transmigration influences the reproduction of similar gender patterns. In an exploratory study about Haitian families in the United States, Fournon and Glick Schiller investigated the importance of reconstructing gender roles and sexuality in order to identify immigrant groups with their own nation-state abroad. In their conclusion these authors understand the idea of nation as a social construction, and transmigrants as actors who elaborate an analogous national identity through the reproduction of family hierarchies. However, the repetition of similar gender roles beyond boundaries is a dynamic process that may embody one or more interpretations allowing, as a consequence, possible new alternatives of interpreting gender relations.

In an article about the patterns of female immigration in Latin America, Paulina de los Reyes (2001) affirms that the 1990's were characterized by a general social crisis and a necessary modification of the economy structure in order to be competitive in international trade. Therefore, the majority of female work and migration are part of a strategy for survival, even if this does not represent an automatic improvement in their condition. Unstable jobs with poor salaries and a higher exposition to be abused are still more related to women's realities than to men, and this is a pattern that Lin found

repeated in old migratory trends as well as in contemporary movements. From her study some socio-demographic changes of the new flows emerge; the most important probably is the identification of diverse age and marital status respect to other traditional trends. In general, recent female migration is composed not only by adolescents, but also by adult women, married women, or single mothers who incorporate to the labor force. De los Reyes concludes that in order to eliminate class and gender inequality in the migratory process it is necessary “the construction of a gender order which better recognizes and values the contribution of women to society” (pp. 287)

By reviewing the literature on gender and migration, it is possible to understand the important role that in recent years feminist theories have had for the inclusion of the female perspective in many disciplines, addressing neglected topics that needed to be explored. In general, those studies have represented the integration of gender and the recognition of women in the migration process. Moreover, gender migration has allowed re-dimensioning the social sciences from more inclusive and intersectional perspectives opening the doors for methodologies such as first person recount and testimonies. Many of these studies relate gender with transmigration, globalization, identities, second generation, and health. In addition, they include important observations about family issues and its possible structural changes within the context of relocation. However, in order to explore deeply the issues of transferred motherhood it is still necessary to look at other works that have as main core the study of family in relation to migration. As Bretell and Jane Simons affirmed, “so much emphasis have been placed on the non-domestic productive roles of immigrant women that the most crucial reproductive role, childbearing, has often been ignored” (1986, p. 15).

Family and Migration

Hania Zlotnik (1995) stresses the importance of the study of family in order to understand migrant women's situation. She considers that women, as main actors of the family migration and important economic providers for their relatives, decide to move mainly thinking of their family's situation and hoping to improve their economic status. The author also portrayed the paradox of such action, considering that women are in general less paid than men, and that migrant workers are less paid than national workers in their same position.

Numerous studies argue that the access that migrant women have to the economic sector can reformulate their traditional status in the family. Accordingly, migration improves in many cases women's positions in the private sphere and change domestic relations (Kosack, 1979; Morokvasic, 1974). However, these theories of the democratization of gender roles within the family structure after migration have been also criticized by other researchers who establish that in some cases, patriarchal patterns can continue or even get worst in the new settings (Brower & Priester, 1983). Morokvasic (1984:893) built a theory combining both positions:

“Migration and incorporation of women in waged employment bring both gains and losses: they may enhance women's exploitation but in the same time, women can gain independence, respect and perhaps awareness that their condition is not fated and that it can be changed.”

Gina Buijs (1993) corroborates this last statement and indicates that within the family context sometimes women gain more power but, other times, the economic and social changes destabilize their role in the family. This is true particularly for non-working mothers who may be more isolated from the guest society and who depend on their school-age children because of their language disadvantage.

The changing power relationship within migrant families has also been studied by Darvishpour (2002) in an inquiry about Iranian families in Sweden. Sweden is one of the western countries where women are considered to have more democratic positions in the family, while Iranian families tend to endorse more patriarchal structures. All these family adjustments to different values and practices imply important changes in the traditional power structure within immigrant families. To the stress of migration the author underlines also the cultural shock of those families, which often leads to develop new conflicts. One example occurs when husbands and wives disagree in how to raise their children, in particular their daughters: while mothers want them to be more integrated in the society, fathers try to keep strict control over their friends and hobbies like in their home countries. In the author's words, "it can be said that among many immigrant families the men tend to live in yesterday, the women in today and the children in the future" (p. 14). The author justifies this arguing that those who lose more power on the move tend to strongly maintain the original traditions. In order to understand the intensification of discrepancies, Darvishpour also focuses on the independence that Iranian women may achieve in the Sweden society and the legal protection they may benefit in case of divorce. In fact the divorce rate is higher among Iranian families than among Sweden families. This study is supported by a previous survey conducted by Tharan (1989) among migrant women who temporally left their families. Similarly to Davirshpou's findings, Tharan discovered that, once they returned in their families, those women are more likely to separate or divorce if their relationships with their partners were already unsatisfactory before the departure. Tharan justifies this

fact not only for the pressure of migrating but mainly as a result of women achieving more emotional and economical independence.

The studies above described make more sense when compared to a research evaluating the differences between two generations of Korean women living in the United States. Seungsook (2003) clarifies that changes in the economic situation and the women's participation in the family income are not enough in order to promote a more egalitarian division of labor between couples. In fact, it is still necessary for both members to understand gender roles – and specially mothering – from a flexible perspective. If this does not happen, it is understandable that the couple experiences tensions and rupture instead of becoming more democratic.

The language disadvantage that many migrant mothers experience has been a specific topic explored by Castañeda (1998) in her essay “Language and other lethal weapons: Cultural politics and the rites of children as translators of culture”. In this work, she explains how many young Latina immigrant children have to assist their parents as translators sometimes in situations where they do not even know the terminology in their mother tongue, such as visits to the doctors, bill payments, or loans. Castañeda affirms that usually translations are made under stressful situations where the actors relate to each other from unequal power positions surrounded by a context of racial, class, gender, and age discrimination. Some professionals may consider these situations positive for the development of language skills of migrant children, but it seems obvious that children translate language and also interpret cultures adopting an adult role that can alter the traditional family structure. This essay explores how those female children are exposed to circumstances that make them grow up faster and how these experiences influence them

in their adult life. However, this study fails to consider the parents' opinions and their feelings about the possibility of losing their traditional roles as protectors of their children or as dependent on them for translations.

Bretell and James Simon (1986) explain that women's work leads them, many cases, to sacrifice of their roles as mothers. One of the strategies that many migrant families pursue with the goal of keeping the family together, while still being a working mother, is to bring one of the grandmothers to live with them in the new country in order to take care of the children. Another strategy that migrant mothers use is to leave their children behind in their home countries under the care of close relatives. In the last case, as Parreñas (1999) found in the interviews conducted among Philippine migrants who worked as nannies in Los Angeles and in Rome, these women said they feel extremely guilty and think of themselves as mothers who had abandoned their children. Similarly, Dias (1989) confirms that migrant women culturally are considered by themselves and by the rest of the society as the main caregivers for their kids, therefore they feel responsible for the possible negative consequences that the separation may have on their children.

Supporting Parreñas and Dias, Hondagneu-Sotelo and Avila (1997) also directed their attention to transmigrant motherhood, understanding transmigration not only as the separation between mothers and their children but also as the way those women "in distance" redefine their roles finding alternatives to mothering. Throughout history, the social construct of motherhood has evolved to an idealistic concept that is now in conflict with the realities of migration. Mothers feel that they are neglecting their children, even if they decided to migrate to economically help their families. Migrants' circumstances

force them to arrange motherhood in a new way where financial aid can be used as an emotional substitute for mothers' absence.

Colson (1991) made one of the first comparative studies between African women and men's responses to migration. Men appeared to be more stressed by economic constraints and by the gains of social status, while women presented higher stress levels in relation to domestic issues and family relationships in the new setting. Neufeld et al. (2001) also recognized how imperative it was to include women into the social study of ethnic minorities. In fact, from a feminist standpoint, they made a significant study in 1999 including the experiences of Chinese and South Asian migrant women who were also family caregivers in Canada. Even if this research was centered on women's health, it gave voice to women who had reconstructed their gender roles within the family after migration. The cultural conflicts that this reconfiguration involves were a main finding. The researchers carried this study considering the cultural diversity of the participants and their diverse characteristics. Particularly important is their discussion about qualitative strategies of feminist research, opening the debate for a social research more open and more sensitive towards minority women and their situation.

In another study conducted by Karen and Kenneth Dion in 2001, gender issues in the functioning of the immigrant family were considered as key points for the social research in the migration field. In addition, for the first time they focused on differences in the parents' expectations and demands for daughters and sons and how this may affect the parent-child relationship, bringing new dimensions to explore, for example in migration studies. In relation to this, Cecilia Menjivar (2002) studied second-generation immigrants in the United States and their transnational links with the original homeland

in Guatemala to explore the role parents play in creating cultural ties and continuity of values among their children. Her research emphasized that many parents felt the need to transmit their culture as a way to ensure a balanced understanding of “who they are” in the next generation (p. 541).

Liamputtong (2001) in an inquiry among Thai immigrant mothers in Australia, she concluded that even if culturally these women had assumed the importance of having children and focused their daily life on being mothers, they also had to recognize the struggles of balancing their traditional way of raising children with the values or practices of the new setting. Therefore, on the one hand, Thai women expressed their happiness in being mothers, but, on the other hand, they expressed loneliness, isolation, and cultural contradictions in the familiar sphere. This study focused on migrant mothers with relatively positive personal situations: many of them were married with local men and were not forced to work because they could enjoy more economic stability. In addition, they were not separated from their children. However, Liamputtong’s study stresses the importance for all social services to give special consideration to ethnicity and class while working with migrant mothers.

International Immigration to Europe: the Case of Italy

Many migrants, working as domestic servants in Italy, entered with a tourist visa and then remained unauthorized. Recently, Italy released 634.728 *permessi di soggiorno* (residence permits) to illegal migrants already living in the country. This has been the most important mass regularization ever made by a European nation. The action was necessary because of the contradictions of demanding foreign workers, but at the same time the difficulties that Italy made to any non-European foreigners to obtain regular approvals before entering to the country. Migrants in Italy cope with many difficulties.

First, Italian immigration laws make the legal access of migrants to this national territory particularly difficult. In this scenario, many migrant are forced to work unauthorized with the consequent exposure to abuses. Second, Italy has a large history as a sender country but not as a receiver: Italians, who are new dealing with other cultures or religions, respond to migrants through social rejection. Because of these generalized situations, the literature review of inquiries about migrants in Italy facilitates the understanding of the structural context surrounding Latin American migrant women.

Jacqueline Andall centered much of her work about migration in Italy (1992, 1995, and 2000b). She affirms that part of the independence that many Italian women enjoy is related to their incorporation to the work force, which in turn is made possible by the work of migrant women arrived to Italy after the 70's. In other words, migrants replaced Italian women's in traditional occupations in the home. Her studies reveal that most of the migrant women coming to Italy have been employed as live-in domestic workers, a sector particularly marginalized because the deficient legislative regulation, the low salaries, and the poor conditions that it offers. Migrants' incorporation to this kind of disadvantaged jobs contributes to their exploitation and to their invisibility. Andall's most recent study (2000b) focuses on African women in Rome, and combines gender and race variables into the migration paradigm with domestic work issues and Italian legislation. She stresses how the Italian social and family structure surrounding migrant women's is affecting their personal situation and limiting their agency. But the very important contribution of Andall's work is to highlight that the adjustment of Italian families to the new social demands occurs at the cost of the family life instability of the migrant women. Using her words, "the social value attributed to the family is limited to the Italian family.

Indeed, its very protection rests on the negation of other women's family lives" (2000b, p. 293).

Salih (2001) centers her attention on the Moroccan women's elaboration of their personal identities and their transnational practices in Italy. She also argues that migrant women, who are mainly employed on the domestic sector, are substituting Italian women's roles in the family. In addition, this author underlines the crucial reproductive role of those migrant women for the future demography of Italy. Italy has more elderly people than young population and the fertility rate is very low. Under these conditions, Italy needs the second and third migrant generation in order to cover national expenses. Paradoxically, the entrance of migrants in Italy is not welcome by the authorities.

Ambrosini analyzed the role of immigrants in the Italian market highlighting that immigrant workers do not substitute or replace Italian workers but complement and support the labor employment with positive consequences for the national economy. The last amnesty that released residence permits corroborates this. However, the public social construction of migration in Italy is mainly negative and carries the prejudice of migrants as plague workers in Ambrosini's own words "immigrant remain useful as long as their usefulness is never explicitly admitted" (2001:73). That is, the use of irregular labor is what really allows the Italian economy to keep functioning. The authorities do not openly value the work of migrants and this in addition to unjustified fear and sometimes xenophobia affect the social integration of migrants and their full incorporation to the Italian society.

"Attitudes and expectations of minorities young women in Europe" was a qualitative research project elaborated by different associations from four European

countries: Italy, Portugal, Ireland, and Sweden. A total of 100 participants were interviewed, 25 out of the 100 were African women in Italy. The main goal was to give voice to ethnic minority's immigrant women. The results underlined how these women self-perceive themselves and their situation negatively as a consequence of the double discrimination they are exposed, at home and outside as women and as racial minority. Many of these women felt excluded and isolated and are considered by many Italian men as prostitutes or as sexually promiscuous. Migrant women in Italy experienced racism in many ways, but they have no power to report them and they do not trust authorities, feeling consequently very vulnerable to any abuse (Aimiuwu, Balsamo; 2001)

CHAPTER 3 METHODS

This is a qualitative inquiry of first person events of migrant mothers in Italy. First person events are the “lived experience” (Varela & Shear 1999) associated to narratives generated through in depth interviews. Working from a feminist-postmodern standpoint, I emphasize the importance of being sensitive to the construction of gender and personal experiences while, at the same time, being reflexively considerate and aware of cultural differences.

One of the most distinctive characteristics of feminist theory is to raise women’s diverse voices and to support them as the key source of knowledge. Feminist researchers usually agree with using women’s experiences and analyzing their narratives in order to, first, avoid standardizations of women’s opinions and realities. Second, the use of women’s first person accounts will facilitate the exploration of the impact that power relationships within society – including those between researcher and participants – have on women’s self-perceptions (Bloom, 1998; Pini, 2003). In this way, feminist inquiries are committed to encourage political and social change in order to reduce gender inequalities and to foster women’s empowering processes and acts.

Feminist research applies a variety of dynamic and changing methodologies that are implemented and combined depending on the research question and design (Whaley, 2001). Qualitative methods represent the most common framework for feminist research. Nevertheless, consistently with postmodern philosophies, no qualitative methodology can be considered *the one* for the feminist paradigm, which in fact has no “single qualitative

idiom” (Holstein & Gubrium, 1997: 215). In this study, I chose to collect my data through open, in-depth, participatory interviews subsequently interpreted through narrative analysis. This methodology has been extensively discussed in the recent social theory literature, above all in regard the importance of conducting interviews that are interactive processes of interpretation between the interviewer and the respondents, who negotiate and co-construct meanings around the particular topic of interest (Holstein & Gubrium, 1995; Kvale, 1996).

From a postmodern perspective “any methodological standpoint is, by definition, partial, incomplete, and historically contingent” (Kholer Riessman, 1993:70). Thus, I decided to analyze the interview material using two complementary methodological approaches. The first one, narrative analysis, is particularly suitable to understand how participants organize their knowledge and experience to make sense in their daily lives. Open interviews are conducted just with a general guideline, but no specific structure or previously prepared questions, therefore allowing interviewees to become personal and unique narrators of their own being.

First-person approach is the second methodology adopted in this study. This is an approach to the study of consciousness, which is interpreted as the validation of the individuals as narrators and first experts of their conscious experience. In other words, subjective experiences become active components of the research by crossing boundaries between personal knowledge and the supposed scientific objectivity of the third-person perspective. Under this principle and contrary to classical positivistic frameworks, there is no room for true or false, real or invented; but for diverse positions that one individual may construct under different conditions. Of course this may imply frequent ambiguities

and even contradictions, depending on the speaker's personal construction in the moment and context of the interview. As narrative analysis, this last procedure relies on first-person accounts as the main data source (Varela & Shear, 1999).

I would like to underline the critical importance that postmodern theories have for this research. More specifically, postmodern feminist theories are at the basis of the whole research design. Under this principle, reality is not a determined and quantifiable phenomenon, and meaning is subordinated to multiple interpretations in relation to the socio-cultural context.

Procedure

Participatory in depth interviews were conducted with ten Latin American migrant mothers living in Italy with school-age children. Participants were selected according to the length of their permanence in Italy with their children: which was chosen to be between two and seven years. This time limit represents a reasonable compromise between the likelihood of finding participants and their ability to recall early experiences related to motherhood. I avoided recruiting participants who had been in Italy for less than two years because, based on my own experience, during the first two years immigrants usually feel emotionally insecure trying to find their positions and identities in the new society.

All interviews started with the same question: "From your personal experience, how does your identity as a mother in your country transfer in your new life in Italy?" Participants usually started the conversation narrating how their life was before migration and what were their main rationales to migrate. My interventions were above all aimed at asking or repeating something interviewees said and that I wanted to point out. In few occasions I had to return to the main question in order to keep the focus on it.

Before arriving to the field work, I contacted some organizations and NGOs that agreed to help me to find possible participants. However, this method turned out to be not successful. First, organizations did not have as many contacts as I thought. Second, because, before contacting the few people they were able to find, they required for long bureaucratic procedures. As my time and resources were limited I decided to change my approach. In order to find the participants I spent many hours around their get-together and hang-out points, like Santa Maria degli Angeli. I started informal conversations with two of the oldest women there, who then introduced me to people they knew. After this, I used snowball sampling to find the rest of participants. I would like to point out that some women refused to talk to me, because they thought I was working for the Italian Immigration Department. However, this recruiting strategy resulted to be more productive and interesting since being in those places for so many hours allowed me to observe part of the participants' daily life. Furthermore, I could talk to other people who, although not potential interviewees, shared their experience as migrants with me.

With the participants' permission I audio-taped the interviews which were conducted in different places, such as participants' homes, coffee shops, and mainly on the street. The main language was Spanish, but almost all participants used a number of Italian words and expressions that I kept in the interviews' transcriptions.

Just after each interview or set of interviews (sometimes I had two participants on the same day), I transcribed them, including interrupted sentences or words, pauses, particular body expressions, facial gestures, my own interventions disclosing similar experiences I had, my feelings, and finally the emotions that many participants expressed. For many of these women it was difficult to talk about certain topics, and some of them

wept. On these occasions, I asked the interviewee if she wanted to interrupt the interview, but all of them preferred to keep on talking.

Participants

Accordingly to feminist methodology, women do not share a unique and universal gendered identity, but some common aspects emerge among women within specific contexts (Little, 1997). Considering this, the limited number of participants, and their diverse countries and backgrounds of origin, I did not pretend to “discover” a collective identity among Latin American migrant mothers. Instead, I was interested in pointing out similar experiences in similar circumstances. In this case, the common character of the interviewees’ experiences was about the difficulties of mothering in a different culture and with adverse circumstances.

I interviewed ten women. In the final analysis I excluded two of the interviews because I did not consider them to be deep enough. Those two mothers did not talk extensively about the relationship with their children. All the references they made to this topic were induced by my specific questions, but their answers were elusive and short. Instead, all other interviews were participatory interactions between me and the mother in which I participated more with comments than with questions. Consequently, even if these two women gave valuable information, I considered that their different style in comparison to the other eight interviews could have negatively influenced the data analysis and interpretation.

The participants’ age at the moment of the interviews was between 28 and 50 years, with children between 2 and 19 years old. Their countries of origin were Argentina, Colombia, Nicaragua, and Peru. Four were working as housekeepers and nannies, one worked as a caretaker for elderly people, two were housewives, and the last one worked

in an information center. Three of these women lived out of Rome, while the other five lived in the city. The participants' race was white European for three of them, mixed indigenous for other four, and mulatto for one. However in the interviews I did not specifically ask about their racial identity, the classification was from my observations which could have been different from the participant's own perspective.

In order to better understand the mothers' situation and to make them the protagonists of their own stories, it is important to provide information and to introduce them in a more personal way, explaining their reasons to migrate, their status in Italy, and other available information. This information will give the reader the chance to personalize this data and to see these women as more than anonymous participants. Their narratives assume voices and faces giving them the credit they deserve as testimonies of their experiences as immigrant mothers in Italy. For confidentiality reasons, as stated in the IRB-approved informed consent the participants signed, I guarantee the privacy of these women by avoiding any personal information that can reveal their identities, like name, age, country of origin, and so on. I have given the names that follow for purposes of legibility.

Victoria: Victoria is in her late twenties. She came to Italy two years ago with her husband and two children of five and three. Victoria also has another baby, who was born in Italy six month ago. Her parents and uncles also migrated one year before her, so all her closest relatives are now in Italy. Nonetheless, she does not like her life in the new setting. Her husband works hard in a factory and he is out of the home for many hours every day. As she does not work, she stays at home taking care of the children. In her country she used to work part time and had an intense social life, her husband had more

time for her and the children, and their economic status was not bad. In Italy her situation changed completely and even if she recognizes that it was necessary to migrate because of her country's political and economical instability, she still hopes to return home one day. Her husband opposes the idea of returning and she knows that it can be difficult to go back. Nevertheless, she insists on returning, once the situation improves even if this will involve being separate from her parents.

Susana: was in her early thirties when she left her country seven years ago. She was divorced and left her 7, 8, and 12 years old kids with her parents. She went back home for the first time after four years. However, one year and a half later, she had enough money to bring her oldest child to Italy. She had to wait another one year and a half to be joined by her second born and, finally, one more year (that is, four years after her arrival to Italy) by her youngest kid. In Italy, Susana has been working for a family as housekeeper and nanny. She lived with them in the first year and then she rented her own apartment. She had a decent salary. The first three years were very difficult because she had to send all the money back home in order to pay school, rent, and food for her children. She also had to pay a debt to some relatives who lend her the money so she could come to Italy. In her family her sister migrated to Italy as well one year before she did, but her sister returned home after two years. Susana had the same intentions as her sister: to save enough money and to return to her country with her children. However, the debt was high and she needed to stay for so long that at the end she thought it would have been better to bring their children to Europe instead of her going back.

Alicia: She arrived alone to Italy nine years ago. She left her one year old son with her mother and she did not see him again for four and half years. She obtained the Italian

work permit three years after her arrival to Italy: before that, it was not safe for her to live Italy. Later, even if she could work legally, she had not enough money to return to her country to visit her family and son: she had to wait more than four years before being able to rejoin her family. During all these years, she was obsessed about saving money to bring her son with her. However, she worked as housekeeper and her salary was very low. Six years after having arrived in Italy, she enrolled in the university to study nursery, but she could not combine classes, work, and taking care of her son, so she had to drop out of college. Susana now has an Italian partner: the three of them live together and she is seven months pregnant. She is still working in the house of an Italian family where she feels like a member of the family. Alicia has no intentions to come back to her home country.

Marcela: She is in her early thirties and she arrived in Italy with her 14 years old son two and a half years ago. They both live together at the house where she is working as a nanny of three children. Marcela considers herself very lucky because she has a job where she can keep her child but she would prefer to have her own place. Back in her country she used to work fulltime as a sales clerk in a shop where she had been for more than 13 years. She loved to work with people and to be a professional but when the business went broke she could not find another good job. In Italy she does not like her work, she feels that it is not really valued even if the salary is good, but the conditions are very hard. She works six days per week all day until night. Marcela wants to go back to her country as soon as she put aside enough money to start her own business at her home city.

Tita: She is in her forties and she went to Italy just three years ago. At the beginning she arrived alone, leaving back in her country four children from 12, 14, 15, and 24 years old, and her husband. At her country her husband had a family business and she did not have to work, just sometimes if he needed some extra help. With the economic crisis they lost everything in less than a year. The decision to migrate was pretty much a family decision; her children also agreed that it was the only solution. Her parents were Italian, so it was not difficult for her to obtain the citizenship. That is why she left first until she could arrange the papers for the other family members. Tita found a job taking care of an old person; she saved money to bring her family to Italy. However they did not reunify completely until almost a year later. Her husband is now working and she works occasionally as a nanny. She feels very happy of their decision to migrate and she has no intention to go back. Tita knows that has been a hard period but she prefers the political and economical stability of Italy. In a certain sense she feels also Italian and reclaims her right to work and live in Italy with her family.

Cristina: She is in her middle forties and she migrated to Italy two years ago with her husband and five kids between 10 and 16 at that time. In her country she used to work in her own business, she was very busy but could combine, work and her family life. Thanks to Cristina's sister, who was already living in Italy, she could bring all her family at the same time. Not all the kids wanted to migrate, and for Tita the first months were very tough. She is not working, now just her husband works, but now that the kids are older she would like to find a part time job. To her to be at home all day long is hard even if she likes to take care of her family, but would like to also contribute to the family income. She has no intentions to return to her country, she says that the economic

situation is not good for the kids there, furthermore she likes Italy and prefer many aspects of her life know.

Isabel: She is in her late thirties and migrated to Italy eight years ago. She was able to bring her two children that she left with her mother three years ago when they had six and nine years old. During the long separation she could go back to visit her family just once. For her this was very hard because even if she obtained the work permit very soon she had no place where live with her family; she shared an apartment with other migrants in a similar situation but no one accepted to live with her kids, so she had to save money to rent an apartment for her alone. After that she brought her two kids and also her mother who helps her with the house and the children. Isabel works hard for almost twelve hours a day; she is conscious that she has no time for herself and her family. In Italy she had another baby with a new partner, who is also a Latin American migrant. She talked to him before bringing her family to clarify that her intentions were to live with her kids and mother and he accepted to live all together. She would like to return to her country, but her sons don not want to, they say that the situation in Italy is better so she aspires to change work and to improve a little her situation.

Angélica: Of all the interviewed she is probably the one who enjoys the best economic situation. She arrived in Italy nine years ago for the first time to assist her brother who was sick with the intention to return to her country with her four kids six months later. However, since she found a job as a nanny for a family with many children she decided to stay. Angelica, which was already divorced, could bring her youngest son of three years old eight months later. Then she started looking for a regular job in order to bring to Italy the other three children, who were under their father's care. Finally after six

years she could bring two of the three daughters, who by now were 14 and 13 years old. The oldest who was 16 at that time decided not to go to Italy and to stay with her father. Angélica changed jobs often and she enrolled in courses for social workers, later she transferred to another city and found a job as a social worker. Because the political situation in her country Angélica decided that she will not return. The few times she goes back is just to visit her older daughter who has also visited her in Italy twice. However, her two daughters have a different opinion, they want to finish their studies and then go back to their country. Angélica says that living in Italy without them will be hard but she considers her daughters to be adult enough to make their own decisions.

CHAPTER 4 DATA ANALYSIS

I used narrative analysis to interpret what Latin American migrant mothers in Italy told me in their interviews. After reviewing the transcripts and doing cross-case scrutiny of the eight interviews, I identified eight common themes that I analyzed:

- Decision to migrate
- Separation
- Italian mothers
- Issues with children
- Mother's strategies to resolve conflicts
- What changed being migrant mother
- Vulnerability
- Identity

These themes should not be considered independent from each other. Instead, their interrelation often determines their own creation, perception, and pragmatic construction by the actors of this study (i.e., participants, researcher, and readers). It is significant, for example, how separation for long periods between mothers and their children relates directly to certain family conflicts, such as guilt feelings of the mothers, feelings of abandonment of the children, and a sense of strangeness between mothers and children (the “unknown” phenomenon).

Consequently, to better understand the complexity of reconfiguring mother-children relationships in a foreign country as well as the issues that emerged during the adaptation period and the alternatives chosen by these mothers to resolve them, it is necessary to look at the picture from a broad perspective. Each theme has to be related to the personal circumstances of each actor (explained in chapter three) and with the particular context of Italy – explained in the introduction and in chapter two. Otherwise, this study would run the risk of falling in simplistic generalizations about migrant mothers and their life in Italy. A stereotypical and reductive exploration of women’s experience would negatively affect their empowerment and would invalidate the main goal of this research, to raise and to present migrant women’s voices.

Decision to Migrate

I started the interviews with a question about their experiences as migrant mothers; seven out of eight women began by explaining how their life was before migrating: jobs, family, and other experiences. Their opening statements were likely aimed at making me understand their life circumstances and the reasons why they decided to move overseas. All the participants identified their economic situation in their home countries as the main reason to migrate. Two women also included political and social instability as some major factors that pushed them to resettle in Italy.

“We were very bad out there. It is sad to loose everything. It is very sad. And to explain it to your children is impossible. With the economic crisis everything just falls from your hands: it is like sifting water, you are working for nothing, you are going nowhere, and everything seems sad, heavy.” (Victoria)

“When I was there I didn’t know what to do. I asked my self: what can I prepare for dinner today if I have nothing? What am I going to give them? Just this kind of squalor? If tomorrow I have an accident and I stop working, my children will have nothing to eat the day after, because what you gain from work is what you eat... nothing can be put aside for the future.” (Isabel)

The interviewed strongly emphasized that to move to another country was the only option for them at that moment of their life. Besides their optimism about improving their quality of life by moving, no one expressed a desire to migrate but, instead, a need for it. Their economic circumstances and the lack of additional alternatives push them to leave their countries.

“We didn’t have any other alternative; no alternative. Some of my children said “No”; others said “Yes”. One of them asked me to leave him behind with my sister, but I didn’t want to. I wasn’t open to discuss this issue because migration was the only alternative for us.” (Cristina)

“Back in my country the situation was not good. Nobody wants to migrate; nobody. It was a hard decision to take because of my children (i.e., because I had to leave my children): they made me take this decision. (...) We decided migrate all together as a family. We didn’t have any other option.” (Tita)

Independently of the structural factors that the participants pointed out, seven out of the eight women stressed that their main motivation to migrate was the fact that they had to support their children. The aspiration to offer a better future to their children was the main rationale behind these women’s migration. Living overseas meant that their children could have more job opportunities, better education, more food, and so on. It is also particularly important for this research to highlight that two of the interviewees, Isabel and Susana, talked about how their emotional relationships with their children were negatively affected by the economic deprivation they used to suffer in their homelands.

“Once you get used to live in one way you cannot stand idle when your children cannot enjoy the same things. It is very sad to think that I was able to go out and have holidays, but that my children cannot. It is very sad that I cannot offer to them those things... and I am not talking about luxuries, no. I am talking about dignity, about life quality; because, what is a children living in deprivation? Is he a boy or a martyr?” (Cristina)

“Back in my country, there were many tensions between my children and myself. I didn’t have money and I didn’t know what to cook. The money was not enough to buy stuff in the market. So I was always under stress. I was angry and, because of this, many times I was hard on my kids.” (Isabel)

“In my country I was a sad mom, and my children noticed it. They were worried about me... they were somehow afraid of me. I never touched them, no, but I was always sad, stressed... too many problems, you know.” (Susana)

Cristina talked about the many times she considered, before moving with her family, the positive and the negative consequences of migration. She was mainly concerned about how this process would affect her children’s life, their emotional stability, and their happiness. Because Cristina felt fully responsible for her children’s protection, she was particularly vulnerable to the fear of hurting them by asking them to resettle in a new country.

“I thought a lot about it... We can hurt our children a lot because they have to leave behind their friends, their security, their space, their “everything”... because a house does not fit in bags, a life does not fit in luggage.” (Cristina)

Separation

To talk about separation was the most difficult and most emotional part of the interview for those participants who had to leave their sons or daughters behind. Often, they wept recalling this period of their life: this painful experience was still vividly present and still influenced their daily life and family relations. During the period of separation, migrant women did not directly question their validation as good mothers because they still provided economically for their families. Yet, to be far from their children made them feel “different” as mothers. As the economic providers they could not supply their children’s emotional necessities and responsibilities as mothers. In addition, the awareness that the separation was a source of distress for both themselves and their children provided a further sense of stress and guilt to the mothers, who felt responsible for the choice and consequences of leaving their homes and families.

“They suffered a lot because of the separation, especially the two young ones. Although they were all together with my sister and my parents, they suffered anyway. My sister told me that they were very sad (...) you have to think that the

first night I slept well in all this period was the day I had all of them with me. That day I slept in peace for the first time.” (Tita)

“To have your child away from you is the most terrible thing that can happen to a mother. To me it was awful. I was working and I was thinking on him. My only preoccupation was to know how he was. The only think I could do was to call him constantly; to call my mum to know how he was.” (Alicia)

Pain and sadness are not the only feelings related to family separation. Various mothers expressed guilt for not having been able to keep their family together. They experienced the separation as symbol of personal failure as mothers, feeling extremely responsible for and threatened about the possibility that something bad could happen to their children during their absence. In these cases, one of the reasons for mothers’ feelings of guilt may be the traditional social constructions of mothers’ roles as those whose first and main activity is to be present at home. At the same time, this historical construction justifies men’s absence from home’s duties and responsibilities.

“I felt awful being here alone. I tried to work a lot and be as busy as possible because every spare time I had I wept and wept. I just worked hard so at night I was so tired that I could sleep and not think about them.” (Isabel)

Often, migrant mothers deal with ever-changing and conflicting feelings about abandoning their families while, at the same time, they often are their only supporters. This personal dichotomy about family care (abandonment vs. support) emerged in ambiguous statements in the interviews. To some extent, these mothers are able to find appropriate justifications that reinforce their “choice” for migrating. However, to better understand the contradictory accounts of these migrants we should consider at least three perspectives: First, narrative contradictions may respond to internal emotional struggles between migrants’ needs and migrants’ wishes. Second, migrants’ apprehension of being judged as good mothers by me at that moment of the interview and by society in general, may contribute to the creation of migrants’ justifications (socioeconomic rationales) and

then their opposite accounts (feeling guilty for having left their significant others). Finally, expressions that may seem contradictory at first sight are not necessarily in opposition. Accordingly, same words or sentences vary their meaning in the narrative depending on many contexts, so one does not invalidate automatically the other. In the examples below, while the inconsistency appears in Isabel's use of the word "abandon", in the second and third extracts there is no obvious contradiction. However, the women added sentences to justify their original statements.

“When my son believed that I abandoned him, I said: ‘Yes, I abandoned you: I did it because I wanted a future for you. I left you, it is true. But I didn’t abandon you because since the first day I came here I looked for a job so you always had to eat’.” (Isabel)

“Back in my country some children at school asked my son who his mum was. He said nothing, he just stayed in silence. Sometimes he could say ‘my mum is in Italy to make money for me’.” (Alicia)

“I am not like other migrant mothers: I never abandoned my daughters. I wasn’t there, I left them... but I always called, and sometimes I sent them money or gifts.” (Angélica)

In some cases, however, not only mothers blamed themselves for the division of the family, but their children also expressed, in one way or another, their emotions on separation. These children expressed to their mothers their sense of abandonment and their pain for facing alone some hard moments of life. Interestingly enough, these manifestations not always had a negative effect in the mother. In fact, on the one hand, the expression of these emotions might increase even more the mothers’ sense of guilt. On the other hand, the open expression of the children’s feelings could also be a first step toward an emotional healing encounter between the mother and their children. These moments of trust and sincerity could facilitate a better understanding of each other’s

situation, and could represent a way of regaining emotional ties that were held for so long.

“I left them in the most difficult period of their lives. They were not very young, and you know, being older was difficult for them, (but) they grew up always very independently. Because the mother’s presence is very important, not only the material things... They swept remembering things that happened to them and that they had to face alone by themselves because I was not there. I cried too. This hurt them, but I had to work.” (Susana)

“My daughters never blamed me. They never thought that I abandoned them, but they explained to me all the moments where they needed me and I wasn’t there. When they told me those hard things, I suffered and I swept a lot.” (Angélica)

In general, separation is or is remembered as a disturbing moment in the life of participants who experienced it. Migrant mothers’ reunification with their children, even if perceived as a moment of joy, was also remembered as a source of stress. In some cases the periods in which the mothers could not be rejoined by any of their children were very long, even more than four years. As it may be easy to expect, the first emotional and behavioral reactions of mothers and children toward each other was fully charged with the anxiety, elation, and trepidation of reunification.

“It was very weird for both of us... The first time we met was very touching for me and strange for him (...) but it was an enormous joy.” (Alicia)

“Our first encounter after such a long time was very difficult. I remember I even didn’t know how to behave with them at the airport. My oldest son recognized me, but we didn’t know if to hug each other or what else to do... we just looked at each other. The youngest was hiding behind his brother who was repeating him ‘she is mom, she is mom’”. (Isabel)

“I think my children perceived me as the same mother as I was before leaving them. However I felt differently about them: to me they were those who really changed. They changed, they grew up, and I was not there” (Susana)

Italian Mothers

In their narratives, some participants expressed various opinions about Italian mothers and the ways they raised their children. While some judgments were negative,

others expressed more positive views. However, it is interesting to observe that migrant women took Italian mothers as an example of what to do or not to do, with their children. To some extent, this process also highlights different degrees of acculturation and assimilation to the host country, which can be seen in the extracts below. In the first example, Marcela shows disagreement and even rejection of Italian culture, mothers, and their way of raising children by pointing out an absolute lack of similarity between her home and host mothering practice. The second example, instead, develops an opposite perspective and considers the Italian way of mothering to be better than her home country's. In particular, she describes the former as more friendly and open. The third example was the most common among the participants: the concept of motherhood is internalized as a universal principle, which is similar within all cultures. The basic idea is that a mother is always a mother no matter where, as if migrants' concept of motherhood was more related to nature than to cultural practice. This does not mean that the participants saw no difference between their and the Italian styles of child care. Instead, it seems that to consider common aspects of mothering was somehow more important than to emphasize potential differences, of which nevertheless they were well aware.

“I have nothing to learn from Italian mothers. I don't like the way they raise their children, I don't like the education they transmit. Children here have no respect. In my country children adore their parents; children respect their parents over anything else.” (Marcela)

“Italian mothers prefer to be more friends of their children; they have a different approach towards children, they are more open (...) I talk a lot with the family I work for, they helped me to understand better my son, and they gave advice to me. I prefer this way of mothering: to me it is more natural.” (Alicia)

“I don't really see any difference between being a mother here and being a mother back in my country. Italian mothers are the same. There is not such a big difference.” (Victoria)

Issues and Conflicts with Children in Italy

Migrant families face a period of unbalance right after they leave their country. During this initial period various issues emerge between mothers and children. In general, back in their countries these conflicts did not use to appear on a regular basis. In Italy, instead, the family disagreements depended on a number of external factors and the particular background of the family. Nevertheless, some common issues appeared throughout the mothers' personal stories. The most frequent problems, and perhaps the hardest to overcome, were those resulting from separation.

Migrant mothers who were separated from their children expressed in several occasions their feelings about been treated as strangers by them. Similarly, some mothers also recognized that they did not know their children well. In these affirmations, the mothers disclosed their disappointment that was at least partially related to questioning – through separation and reunification – the socio-typical assumptions about the inherent love and mutual confidence between mothers and children. Before migrating, these mothers never expected that they might have come to the point of failing to recognize their own families. In the mothers' eyes, this feeling is not supposed to appear between mothers and their children because this cultural construction of instinct and natural knowledge of mothering is taken for granted instead of being recognized as culturally relative. This sense of the “unknown” caught many participants unexpectedly, causing emotional upheavals. I connect these mothers' feelings with the idea of the stranger developed by Georg Simmel, who well identified that the fear of “otherness” is not in regard to “the person who stays today and goes tomorrow, but rather, to the person who stays today and stays tomorrow” (Wolff, 1950:402). Simmel's word can be extended to the mother-child dyad: mothers and children were more intimidated about knowing how

to restart a new and stable relationship between them than simply from the first encounter.

“Children suffer twice for migrating. Especially if the mother was not there with them, they experience a double process of adaptation: adaptation to the new culture and adaptation to the mother.” (Angélica)

“He realized that I was his mother, he knew my voice, and he had pictures of me. That was the first time we met in person. I left him when he was one year old: he was taking his first steps, saying his first words but I had to leave him (...). Little by little I got to know him.” (Alicia)

One of the mothers stressed that, at the beginning, the different expectations that her children had about Italy were a source of conflict between them. During the years they were separated from their mother, the children imagined that their life conditions in Italy would have been better, in particular at the economic level. Every month their mother sent remittances that were of a considerable amount for their country's standards. Comparing the family economic situation in Italy with Italian average income at the moment of the interview their income was still among the lowest strata of the population, even if the absolute values were much higher and better than in their home country. Moreover, these children faced discrimination at school. This is another aspect that may have affected their negative perception of Italy and generated tensions within the family. During the initial period in Italy, the children complained a lot and showed bad attitude toward their mother.

“They had other dreams other expectations; they imagined Italy in a different way. Sometimes they want things that I cannot afford... especially my youngest son. He couldn't understand the situation, and that was hard for both of us.” (Isabel)

Another sad note for some of the participants was to remember that, at the beginning, their children did not seem to appreciate the work that mothers did for them. The mothers interpreted this as ingratitude and lack of respect for their efforts of working

in a foreign country. Of course, if we consider what was said earlier about the women's awareness that one of the main reasons for migrating was their children's progress, it is understandable that these mothers were afraid that their children would not understand all the sacrifices they made for them. In fact, marginalization from their own family has been one of the saddest points these women recalled during our conversations.

“Sometimes children do not realize the sacrifice that mothers make for living here. We are not always happy. Only God knows how many things I had to pass alone, how many tears, crying, and sadness; all this just to give them everything. But, unfortunately, this was not useful to increase in them the feelings of sons toward mother.” (Susana)

“At the beginning they rebelled against me because I expected that once in Italy things would be as if I never left. I had been far from them for so long... I could no pretend many things.” (Angélica)

In the part of the interviews that dealt with separation, contradictions emerged through statements that were followed by immediate denials. In this section, migrant mothers, while narrating their stories, appear as contemporaneously organizing their knowledge and their perceptions about the subject they address. As a consequence of this construction or reconstruction of meaning by talking, many people created their own internal balance by asserting and negating the same thing. This is an indication of personal reflexivity (Varela, 1999; Alvesson & Sköldbberg, 2000). This is particularly noticeable when people remember painful experiences for which they felt responsible. So, they actively try to state and justify their position on issues that otherwise may potentially be source of guilt feelings. However, from a postmodern perspective my goal was not to discover the reasons why these participants expressed contradictory views. What is relevant for the analysis is to realize that these mothers “chose” to explain these issues to me in different ways. The social constructions of being good mothers and their daily life experiences did not always match due to social and personal constraints. The

examples below illustrate the oxymoron: in the first case Alicia says that she does and does not know her son. In the second case, Victoria is debated between protecting and neglecting her children.

“After four years I think I know him now and he knows me too. Well, actually we just started understanding each other, knowing our personalities. He is very sensitive, very affectionate. I think we still need more time together. Still my mother knows him better than me... even after all these years (in Italy) he still didn't completely open to me.” (Alicia)

“My relationship with my children changed, you know... My husband and I had many tensions at the beginning; it was hard for everybody. Now I try to protect them even more. I am always worried about them, about the things they need. (...) Because my husband is not at home all day long, I have to do all by myself... and I can't. It is as if I neglected them a little because I have no time for everything. I have no time for them.” (Victoria)

The children's proficiency of the foreign language over their parents' poor Italian was one of the aspects that most influenced the change of roles within the family. In some occasions, children translating for adults achieve responsibility and empowerment. Although this dynamic is very common among family migrants in general, it appeared in just one of the interviews (Castañeda, 1998). One possible explanation for this is that many of the participants migrated to Italy long before their children. Consequently, these mothers had enough time to learn the language. Another possible reason, in the case of the women who traveled with their family since the beginning, is that the differences between Spanish and Italian are not as pronounced as with other languages. So, adults could easily acquire the basic skills to communicate in a relatively short time. They were never completely dependent on their children translations.

During the interviews, however, all women asserted that their children currently speak and write Italian better than they do. This was an important issue for Victoria who used to help her children with their homework, but now she cannot do it any longer with

the same efficacy. In these cases, Italian language became a source of stress because it can, in a certain sense, decrease the children's expectations of their parents, and mothers are aware of this.

“No one spoke Italian before arriving. At the beginning I spoke as I could. My oldest son learned Italian very fast and, at the beginning, he used to translate for us. Not in front of people... no, but you know, then at home he explained to us what people said. I think that he took advantage of this situation, a little bit. He felt important.” (Victoria)

“It was hard, and still is. I cannot help him with his homework, because Italian is not my mother tongue. For example, if my son feels sick one or two days and miss school the teachers want me to help him at home with grammar, but I can't, it is not my language.” (Victoria)

In Italy, mothers often felt guilty about their children because of the many hours they had to work out of home. In the eyes of these women, their role as mothers was not compatible with their role as workers; for them, their presence at home as main caregivers was more important for the good functioning of the family than the presence of anybody else, including their husbands. However, in order to cope with the need and related responsibility of being far from home, migrant mothers had to renegotiate the meaning they aspired to ideal motherhood. Neither Latin American nor Italian cultures appear to be very responsive toward these conflicts: gender roles and classic family representations still place women mostly at domestic private spheres. The negative self-perceptions of these working mothers and the lack of social support, predictably affected their family relationships.

“Worker mothers always feel guilty, even if they do it for their children. Even if they work to buy beautiful shoes to their children, to pay for better schools, or to provide quality health care, these mothers still feel guilty.” (Cristina)

“When I arrive home my children are already sleeping, so I act as mother when they are not present. I prepare their clothes for school, I cook for the day after, but they not see all this.” (Isabel)

Talking about the initial period with her children in Italy, one of the women I interviewed confirmed the numerous changes that occurred in her family in relation to the migration process. She described the first year as a stage of readjustments to the new society and family roles. However, this mothers' experience was the opposite of most the families of other women. Tita, for example, went from being a full time business woman back in her country to being a housekeeper in Italy. But, according to Tita, her new status was not the main source of tensions. Instead, the biggest change was that now she was able to spend more time at home. To her children this meant a lesser degree of responsibility and independence than they used to experience at home. They became more assisted and received more attentions. From Tita's point of view, family relocation in a new place with a different culture and a new language causes distressing emotions on each member of the family. Each family member faces the challenges of relocation in idiosyncratic ways, which potentially may diverge and cause family problems. From Tita's perspective, once all the family members adapt individually to the new context, then the family can function and find stability again.

“Migration disturbs and unbalances the family's everyday life. The family feels exposed, insecure. (...) it requires time to have it back. It is not only that I am at home now... what happen is that the children and I had to deal with so many changes in our life that our relationships were kind of secondary for us.” (Tita)

To conclude this section about some of the conflicts that may appear during the first phase of family resettlement, it is important to underline how migrant mothers may also question their decision to migrate. Cristina expressed doubts about migration: for her, the hard moments and sacrifices of the initial period were so overwhelming that she sometimes thought that migrating was a mistake. Nonetheless, even if Cristina was remembering the conflictive stages of her family life with pain and dramatic emotions

(she wept much during the interview), at the end of her discourse she asserted that migration was the necessary answer to their problems.

“In these moment a person wonders if so many changes and so much personal sacrifices really were necessary (Cristina stopped talking for some instants: she was crying). But after crying and thinking a lot I arrived to the conclusion that yes, besides all our personal conflicts, besides my fears and doubts. We had to keep trying.” (Cristina)

Mother’s Strategies to Resolve Conflicts

In the previous section, I pointed out that the narratives of conflict between mothers and children who have been separated are different from those who were not apart. As a result, we can anticipate that the two groups used different strategies to face the new family issues in Italy. In the case of the families who were separated, as illustrated in the first example below, mothers were more worried about how to increase their children’s trust in them. Some migrant women, like Alicia and Isabel, asked for the help of those who took care of their children during their absence, in general the grandmothers. Alicia often called her mother back in her country in order to ask for directions about how to “behave” with her son. Isabel asked her mother to come to Italy, so that the children could have another caretaker there. Grandmothers were in many cases the bridge for the initial communication between mothers and children.

“I had to win my children’s affection back little by little, in a very subtle manner. I tried to make them aware of what they were in their countries and of what they could become in Italy. I had to make them develop and trust their image of a better future, if they study and make progress.” (Angélica)

“I didn’t know what to do or how to behave. I called many times my mom back home because she was the one who raised him. She knew him better than I did and she told me what to do.” (Alicia)

“I think it was not so difficult for me because I brought (to Italy) my mother as well... she talked to him many times, she made him understand the situation. My mother helped me a lot and for the children it represented a less traumatic change.” (Isabel)

Independently from having or not experienced separation, all mothers said they talked a lot with their children. For many mothers verbal communication was the most effective strategy to follow in order to overcome the issues with their children. However, it was sometimes difficult to initiate a verbal exchange on delicate concerns and in an unfamiliar context, and some mothers had the sensation that their children were not listening to them. Participants emphasized that they tried to explain the different living and cultural situations to their children through an open dialogues, helping them on their adaptation concerns about Italy. All participants in general considered that the process of adaptation was not easy for their children: they had to learn another language, meet new friends, and all this in a different culture. Sometimes they had to face discrimination at school and in other public spaces. In these cases, mothers tried to give them confidence and to boost their self esteem by point out the positives of being foreigners.

“We talked a lot... a lot about our feelings. I was more flexible with them but at the same time, for some things, I had to be stricter with them. Each situation needed a particular response. (...) it is very stressful, you know... you talk, and talk, and talk... and when you finish they ask you again: why? Those moments are when you think that they never listen and that your efforts to explain the situation to them were vain, useless. But you know what? They really listen to you; they just need time and you, patience.” (Tita)

“I always remind him that, okay, he is foreigner. But (I always reminded him) that he has many advantages because of this: for example he can speak another language while his classmates don't; and I say, ‘You must be proud of this; proud of your culture’.” (Isabel).

After verbal communication, the second most common strategy used among migrant mothers was acceptance and adjustment. Mothers understood that the difficulties of living in a foreign country increased for their children or, at least, they experienced it from a more negative perspective. Then, mothers struggled to adapt themselves to their

children's personalities and wishes, even if for mothers this accommodating approach implied even more personal dilemmas.

“Support, I used to support them a lot (...) Support is to embrace... you know, it is like when you add the eggs to the flour, you need to hold (i.e., nurture, contain) it so nothing goes out, otherwise it would be a chaos, a disaster (...). Support is love, is to receive a little bit of their sadness so they can feel better.” (Cristina)

“I tried to accommodate myself to him (her son) pretty much. It is understandable, for him it was so hard (to migrate). We, migrant adults, never adapt to the country but we can live with resignation. We accept the things that life brings to us. For a kid it is different: they cannot just accept, the obstacles become like mountains to them, so you, as a mother, need to be there with him, to let him know that not everything is bad. I talked a lot to him. I tried to explain to him all this.” (Marcela)

What Changed Being a Migrant Mother?

In general all mothers agreed that their relationships with their children did change after migration. Six out of the eight participants stated that they felt comfortable with the interaction established with their children. After the initial period of adjustment, these mothers were able to reestablish satisfactory ties with their children. In some cases these ties were even better than in their country of origin. The main explanation mothers provided for this improvement was that they achieved better socioeconomic status. As their economic situation improved, they felt more secure and stable in their jobs and lives. Those women gained peace of mind and control over their lives, knowing that their jobs and economic security depended on them and that they were not jeopardized day after day by external factors. Women could enjoy an emotional stability that contributed to develop positive relationships with their children.

“I am sure that, because of immigration, my relationship with my children is very different now. I don't know if it is better or worst, but I know it is different. Now I am very happy, and probably I would be happy also there. But there have been so many changes in our lives... and you don't say and don't do the same things if everything around you changes so much. Inevitably you change as well.” (Angélica)

“Here I feel better; so the way I approach my sons is different. Back in my country I had many tensions with my children. I didn’t have money and I didn’t know what to cook. My money was not enough to buy things in the market. So I was always under stress. I was angry and, because of this, many times I was hard with my kids. Now I feel closer to them.” (Isabel)

“To me, the peace we have here it is most important. We all feel secure; we do not worry about tomorrow, so this is making us more relax, happier. I feel that now I am more their friend than just their mother. I had to do it if I wanted to keep the family together.” (Cristina)

In contrast to these statements, two of the participants declared that their family relations deteriorated. Marcela wanted to manage the relation with her son in the same way than she used to in her country of origin, but she felt that the Italian culture –more liberal and permissive from her perspective– was influencing her son too much. Marcela disagreed with many aspects of the Italian culture and with her son who wanted to live more in the “European way”. In this case, it is interesting to consider that Marcela’s son migrated at a very delicate –developmentally speaking– age, fourteen, and that two years and a half after being in Italy he demanded more independence and privacy. Therefore, besides the negative influence of the migration process over her family relationships, Marcela had also to deal with ordinary issues of adolescence and development from teenage to adulthood of her only child.

In the second example, Victoria was not satisfied with her family relationships either. From being a part-time working mother with an active social life, she became a full time housewife with three small children and a husband who had to work for many hours each day. Her economic position did not change too much in Italy and, in addition, she lost her job, independence, and friends. These circumstances relegated Victoria almost exclusively to the private sphere of family and home. In addition, she had to deal with some problems in her marriage, which she did not have in her home country. This

situation made her unhappy and in many ways it affected the interactions with her children.

“To me nothing changed. It is the same: a mother is a mother in any part of the world, but here it is more difficult to control your children because all the time we spend out home working. I thing here I am not as close to my son as I used to be; I don’t know... it is different.” (Marcela)

“Economically speaking I am better now, but all the rest is falling apart. (...) In my country I think I would be a happier mother. Probably my husband and I would not have had the problems we have here. We would be the same couple or even better, and I would have been happier with them (i.e., her children) because I was sad and I made them feel bad.” (Victoria)

Vulnerability

Many participants related episodes of their life in Italy in which they have been victims of social prejudice and injustice, at work and in other public spaces. Because of their condition as migrants – some with an illegal status – and their economic needs, these women were more exposed to discrimination and were also unable to defend themselves at that moment. The vulnerability of migrants makes them a population at risk (CEPAL, 2002). Of course, this situation jeopardizes the process of a positive adaptation to the new culture as well as migrant’s personal self-perceptions. In their turn, these challenges also affect how migrants interact with the host society and their own family. In these situations, migrant mothers cannot do much to stop it and, moreover, they have the responsibility of taking care of their children. Some of the women, like Cristina and Marcela, were very conscious about the social disadvantage of being migrants, and expressed it in different ways.

“The discrimination in this country is against the foreigner. Of course if you have blond hair and blue eyes it is easier, but still regardless of the race at one point or another you will feel that you are a foreigner. They make you feel less.” (Cristina)

“This is not our future. Our conditions as migrants are not good here. I didn’t study but I know many professionals who cannot find a decent job: they all work in the

domestic service. We don't have opportunities just because our passport is not Italian; this fact is marginalizing us from everybody else in any circumstance.” (Marcela)

Among the many episodes of discrimination, I selected the cases of Alicia and Victoria because they represent the subtle intolerance that many migrant women experience in their everyday life. In these cases, it is not easy to talk about overt discrimination because there is a fine line between it and the “politically incorrect”. Nobody committed any punishable offense and it was not strictly a transgression of their rights. However both mothers felt offended by the circumstances and knew that was not acceptable. Furthermore they could do nothing to protect themselves even if they felt personally attacked.

In the first example below, the school had first to talk to Alicia in order to reach an agreement. Definitely the school exaggerated sending the policemen to Alicia's house, which just made her feel in danger of losing her son. In the second case, the doctor ignored Victoria's right to know and decided about her children's health. This episode offended Victoria because she considered that the doctor acted as she had both no interest and no ability to understand.

“I used to arrive in school to pick up my son five minutes late. My classes at the University finished at the same time that his school. I was close but always arrived five minutes late. One day the teachers a policeman sent to my house with an official notification from the municipality telling me that next time I arrive late they will send me the social services. I was shocked because the teachers never complained to me and I had no idea. They could say something to me before taking this drastic position. I had to leave the University. I could not risk to have problems with the authorities... I am a foreigner.” (Alicia)

“Once, I brought my oldest son to the doctor and the doctor just gave the medicines without explaining anything to me. They thought that because I couldn't speak Italian well they had no obligation to explain what my son had. And that's not true. I can understand if you talk to me slowly, if you explain it to me I will understand it. They make you feel like... you don't speak so you don't know. And of course, at

the beginning I couldn't defend myself. I had this sensation (of powerlessness).” (Victoria)

Identity

All the sections of this chapter are closely related to identity. Migrant women's backgrounds, economic situation, vulnerability, and their relation with their children in the new setting influence women's self-awareness about their role as mothers. Each participant had personal definitions of what it meant to be a mother. However one of the participants, Alicia, briefly referred to her personal construction of the role as a mother. She was the only one to partially detach motherhood from nature; what is learned from what seems instinctual.

“In Italy I started to be a mother again; I relearned how to do it. I left that he was so young and for so long... that I really never was a mom.” (Alicia)

On the other hand, some participants considered this role as universal and inalterable. Others realized the positive or negative changes in their experience of mothering before and after migration. However, interesting enough, all of them described themselves first as mothers and then as migrants, Latinas, women, or workers. The changes of their lives have affected also how they perceive themselves. For the migrants who work in Italy one of the major changes was the amount of hours that they spent out of home. In many cases they felt that their absence took over their role as caregivers making them feel “less mothers”.

“I am first a mother, then so many other things, also a migrant, but my motherhood comes first... you know... Once, my youngest son was sick: he was very sick, and you cannot imagine how sad it is for a mother to see her kid in that state. Nothing, nothing can compare to that pain, not even to leave your homeland, not even to be a migrant.” (Cristina)

“I am a mother above all, no matter what. I can forget I am an immigrant, otherwise it would be so sad for me, but I cannot forget I am a mother. Being a mother is what helps me face the problems of living in a foreigner country.” (Alicia)

CHAPTER 5
TRANSFERRED MOTHERHOOD: FINDINGS AND CONCLUSIONS

Findings

Marcela, Cristina, and Victoria came to Italy with their children. Susana, Isabel, Alicia, Tita, and Angélica, instead, had to leave them back home. Some of the interviewed mothers moved with their husbands, others were single mothers, separated or divorced. The age of the nineteen sons and daughters of the migrants ranged from two to nineteen years old. Victoria and Isabel each had a child born in Italy; Alicia was expecting her second child. The level of education of the mothers that I interviewed differed: some of them were professionals back in their countries, while others had a basic education. Thus, the participants' adaptation to the new setting, their relations with their children, the family conflicts related to the move, and the way in which the women deal with stressful situations should be expected to be very different.

These personal factors, together with the Italian context and the way each participant experienced the move configured each participant's unique perception of herself as migrant and mother. Given these sources of variation, generalizations about findings must be considered tentative, and should not serve to generate stereotypical attributions of typical migration experiences. Nevertheless, some patterns do emerge from the interviews and my encounters with Latina mothers in Italy.

First, the decision to migrate was a long, reflective, and thoughtful process that all women, except Victoria, pressed by poignant constraints such as poverty, joblessness,

and single parenthood in addition to historical-structural factors such as the economic and political instability, that left little room for considering anything else but migration.

Second, for the families who divided in order to allow the mother to go to Italy first, the separations were the actual most traumatic factors of the migration process. Children grew up having feelings of being abandoned, while mothers developed intense feelings of guilt that they perceived as being in contradiction to their sacrifices and their responsibilities as the main family providers.

Third, the judgments of Latin American immigrants expressed about Italian mothers varied among those interviewed. Immigrants liked or disliked Italian mothering styles depending more on their personal experience and the resources available to them rather than on objective differences in cultural values. In general terms, the opinions of the Latinas interviewed were neutral; migrant mothers considered “mother” to be an invariant, universal role, independent of cultures and geographical location.

Fourth, the issues and conflicts that emerged during the first period of family adaptation to Italy should be considered from two different standpoints. In the case of families who were separated, feeling of strangeness was the main concern: after the extensive distance, mothers realized their children grew up and changed. Simultaneously, some young children did not remember their mothers who were replaced in their emotional, nurturing role by another member of the family – usually the grandmother. Migrant mothers expressed their intense efforts and aspirations to reestablish significant emotional ties with their children. A second issue related to separation was the disappointment that many children had about their life conditions in the host country. In many cases the children had exalted, stereotypical and unrealistic aspirations of their life

in Italy. This disillusionment showed as lack of gratitude toward their mothers. Some migrant children faced in Italy issues of class, race, and language discrimination and blamed their mothers for their situation. As should be expected, this situation created family tensions and feelings of failure in the mothers.

In the case of families who arrived all together in Italy, the most common concern was about the disruption of the normal family functioning. In fact, people needed time to find their personal balance first, before starting work on their family relations. In some cases language proficiency was another issue. Even if it was not a big source of conflict because of the similarities between Italian and Spanish, some mothers (such as Victoria) experienced their inability to help their children with school homework as frustrating and negatively affecting their self-identity as a good parent.

Working mothers had to spend many hours out of the home: all reported this as source of distress because, on the one hand, it was necessary to the family economy but, on the other hand, women felt they were neglecting their children. The contradiction that these women experienced between the social construction of perfect mothering and their realities and needs developed into psychological dilemmas and, above all, into feelings of guilt.

Fifth, migrant mothers had to adopt and develop new strategies in order to deal with the needs that emerged from being a parent in the host country. These strategies developed spontaneously, without having been previously planned out. They were the fruit of the women's improvisations in their everyday life to resolve conflicts and, basically, go on with their lives. To the participants, these new educational and relational patterns or strategies seemed an immediate and natural response to their children needs.

Among the strategies used, verbal communication was aimed at boosting mothers' understanding of their children's concerns related to cultural adjustment and, in general, the new situation. Adjusting to the children's needs was another strategy to both accommodate them and to get emotionally closer to their needs, likes and wishes. In addition, this nurturing approach was also likely to alleviate some of the guilt described above.

These strategies looked very simple, but in the context of the recent migration and reunification they were not as straightforward as they can appear at first sight. Mothers had to dedicate many of their emotional efforts to these tasks, neglecting their own personal needs. Most of the interviewees, however, said that it was worth doing it and they were satisfied with the results of their efforts.

Sixth, several mothers expressed that their relationships with their children changed after migration. Due to economic and social stability, many of these women felt happier and more relaxed, and this had a positive effect in the interactions with their children. Victoria and Marcela, instead, thought that their family stability was lost. Victoria was facing marital issues, while Marcela did not know how to deal with her teenage son and the Italian way of life. For both of them, their situation in the home countries was not as critical as for the other mothers; economically speaking, they did not experience a significant improvement.

Seven, without exception, all participants described themselves first as mothers. This is directly connected with reasons of their migration, which was addressed in the first point of this section. Their responsibilities as mothers and, in many cases, as the main or only provider organized these women's world.

Eight, these women's self-perception was strongly influenced by their own vulnerability as migrants and as women in a different society that did not value their jobs and their contribution to the national economy. Nevertheless, marginalization was a secondary subject for the participants. The main concern was to reestablish positive relationships within the family and to help their children to improve their status in the host society.

Finally, the strong wish to improve their children's life played a key role in motivating mothers toward resettling abroad, and this was eloquently expressed by all the Latinas I interviewed. Interestingly enough, no one expressed regrets for having migrated. In the same vein, all the narratives supported the fact that the family structure of these women did not change remarkably, even when mothers recognized many positive and negative changes in their way of mothering and in their interactions with their children and other members of the family. However, the ways of relating between family members in Italy appeared to them to be basically the same as the way they related in their home countries. Migrant mothers described the migration process as a difficult and unbalancing period for their families. In order to reconstruct regular and satisfactory interactions, the family members had to find first their personal stability. While this initial goal was true for most family members, mothers had to leave their own satisfactions aside in order to attend those of their family.

Transferred Motherhood versus Transnational Motherhood

“Transnational families are defined here as families that live some or most of the time separated from each other, yet hold together and create something that can be seen as a feeling of collective welfare and unity, namely ‘familyhood’, even across national borders.” (Fahy Brycesson & Vuorela, 2002, p. 3)

The study of transnational families is an emerging topic that specifically centers on the exploration of the interrelationships among family members that live in different geographical locations. The adjustment of migrant families to the receiving nation states; their links with the homeland and the family still living there; their concepts of belonging and their national identity; as well as how this relates to globalization process are among the main interests of the emerging field of transnational families (Vuorela, 2002). The study of motherhood from transnational viewpoints focuses on the separation of mothers from their children, the process of reunification, the substitutes in the mothering role, and the ways in which mothers keep fulfilling the emotional and material needs of their children.

A broader look at issues of separation and reunification emerged from this study. My aim was not to study families when separated, but to explore the concept of “transferred motherhood”, which I develop as a result of this research. “Transferred motherhood” describes the relationships between mothers and children in the host society, taking into account changes in the family performance, conflicts in the host society, and the strategies mothers devise to create harmony and wellbeing for their families. Thus, the concept that I introduce here goes beyond issues of separation, to concentrate on the complexities of the lived experience that the migrant women call “family.” In this context, family is something to be realized, a project that extends into the future. Pierre Bourdieu developed the concept of family as the collective construction of reality that is mainly based on “fictions” that organize social structures to such an extent that they become “realities” (Bourdieu, 1993). Similarly, the concept of motherhood is constructed not only around the lived experiences of mothers but also

around the societal ideal of motherhood. That is, the participants' aspiration of fulfilling stereotypical social constructions of ideal motherhood was more important than the personal experiences and knowledge of the topic. Following Bourdieu's elaborations on family, I consider motherhood a shared construction that organize the individuals' world, and that is personally adopted as natural and universal.

My theory of "transferred motherhood" considers long distance mothering as a unique human relation. By contrast to "transnational motherhood", I am interested in observing how the relationships—the interaction between mother and children—is "relocated" from the home to the foreign country. For instance, this new approach addresses the experience of being a mother during resettlement as compared to the mothering done in the home country. I want to examine the reasons the women give for the changes that their families are going through, and what strategies the mothers and other family members pursue in order to find again their personal and family stability. Needless to say, this family stability might or might not have been present in the family's life in the country of origin. Multiple variables are involved in the dynamics of this complex experience that legitimizes the consideration of "transferred motherhood" as a new framework.

"Transferred motherhood" represents a contribution to the study of transnational motherhood. Its main purpose is to expand the studies of gender and family migration in order to achieve a more adequate knowledge, one that better help us to understand the mothers' life in the process of relocation. I introduce this concept to provide an overall frame of reference that can support future studies. From a feminist standpoint, "transferred motherhood" emerges as both a framework and a topic of study: it is a

perspective that informs the creation of knowledge about the experience of migrant mothers that, in turn, outlines an area of study.

The scholarly attention to “transferred motherhood” will open the possibility for an emerging new theory that will likely boost our knowledge and understanding of this crucial aspect of many migrant women’s lives. Considering the important increase of female migration around the world, research from this particular perspective will draw attention to the challenges and the potential inherent in being a mother abroad. From a policy main perspective the introduction of the notion of “transferred motherhood” will allow the creation of social services more sensitive to the needs of migrant women. Moreover, addressing the struggles, needs, and efforts of mothers will increase the social recognition of the contributions these women make to the host country and their own nations, and crucially, the concept should encourage the review of patriarchal social constructions of family and the traditional women’s role on it.

Limitations of this Study

In the course of this research and in particular during the data analysis, I realized that many other aspects of “transferred motherhood”, besides those already considered, could be addressed. Future research should consider the following considerations:

Depending on the age, it would have been interesting to talk to the participants’ children, proposing the same main question I asked to their mothers: “If you compare your relationships with your mother before arriving to Italy, do you see any difference? If your answer is ‘yes’, what are the changes and why do you think they occurred?” In future research we should try to get at the children’s perspective. We should explore what the mothers refer to as “strangeness” and ingratitude. A study of dynamics as seen by all members of the family would be an important element to consider.

The role that race and class play in the migrant mothers' daily life is another topic that should be explored further. We should deeply study how race and class enter into the way the host countrymen treat and receive the migrants. We should also study how race and class enters into the identity formation of the migrants as outsiders" and how race and class influence the children's self-perceptions. My hypothesis is that the more discrimination the mothers and children suffer, the more the family context represents a protected space, a shelter against the external world. As a consequence, family interactions may intensify, leading to new pressures and challenges.

Through my visits to different churches, I recruited five of the participants. It is likely that these women were believers who regularly assisted to religious acts. I did not explore the participants' religious and spiritual aspects of their lives and the influence they may have on mothering. In addition, the Catholic Church's views of the family and the women's role may color the migrants' perceptions of motherhood. Do they feel that the Catholic Church protects them? or that it rather perpetuates women roles in the domestic sphere? Does the idealization of motherhood by religion contribute to, or does it help to cope with, the stress and conflicts between being good mothers and, at the same time, main providers?

Finally, some of the participants' comments have been considered from my "European" perspective and own definitions. I did not ask the mothers to define all the concepts that rose during the interviews, such as friendship or being good mothers. By doing this I naively fell into the same universal, invariable interpretation of these concepts that I attribute to the mothers. The importance of cultural differences in the definition of these women stock of knowledge should be empirically appraised.

Final Conclusions

Feminist researchers studying migration have highlighted the need to avoid essentialist theories, contemplating voices and testimonies, more than numbers and goodness of fit. They want to expose and understand rather than giving definitive explanations. In feminist studies, variables such as race, social class, ethnicity, and religion, among others, are included in order to understand gender differences through women's perspectives.

In Italy, immigration from Latin America and other continents continues to increase. This is not a temporary migration, as evidenced by the fact that the main concern of migrant mothers is to bring their children to live with them. The incorporation of these populations into the European social structure and way of life is, and will remain an issue, that must be addressed in culture and social policy. Dropping the belief that integration is an individual "choice", integration policies that support equal opportunities, salaries, and conditions for migrants are important, and needed measures that each government will have to consider implementing sooner or later. Political administrators have to understand who the immigrants are, what their life circumstances are, and what their ongoing integration processes are like. This was the main motivation that encouraged me to describe a few elements of the migrant mothers' situation. Migrant women in general are becoming the main protagonists of recent migratory processes to Europe, but this topic is still quite neglected by social scientists.

The main focus of this research was to analyze from a feminist perspective how mothers, after an initial period of unbalance and adaptation, reconstruct their relationships with their children in a different country, and how these women perceive the changes that occurred. Mothers, however, cannot be considered in isolation from other

family actors nor from various significant external factors. To explore motherhood and migration means also to explore gender relations and changes of the family structure within the private sphere, as well as to discover migrant women interactions in the public spaces.

Mothering is a social construction that determines how social actors feel, think and act. The self- representations of migrant mothers as good caregivers often clashes with their economic and social realities. Latin American migrant women are actively incorporated into the work force. On one hand these mothers are often forced to leave their families behind and to become mere economic providers from a distance. When they bring their children with them, however, the many hours they work out of home influences the way they relate to their children. Migrant mothers who stay at home also experience drastic changes in their family interactions as the mother copes with the stress of being alone at home all day long, in a foreign society when their social support networks were left behind in their home country.

This study underlines how each individual experience of “transferred motherhood” depends not only on structural conditions, but also on historical events, and personal factors that make this experience unique for each one. The migrant mothers’ relation with their children in the host country is to some extent influenced by the personal level of satisfaction that these women achieve. This satisfaction is based on personal values, priorities, aspirations, identities, and on how the family situation used to be back at home.

This research has unearthed dilemmas and aspects in the life of migrant women that require better and more extensive research. My objective was not to find “truth” or to elucidate facts, but to call attention to an important actor largely ignored until now:

migrant mothers. By exposing part of migrant mother's realities, issues, and strategies, I hope to have been able to give the deserved credit to Tita, Cristina, Victoria, Marcela, Susana, Alicia, Isabel, and Angelica –and the other two women that do not appear in this work– who contributed their voice on the important topic of Latin American migrant motherhood in Italy. To them, I dedicate this thesis.

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BIOGRAPHICAL SKETCH

Yolanda Hernández-Albújar was born in Barcelona, Spain, on June 30, 1970. She received her Bachelor of Arts degree (with a major in Special Education) from the University of Barcelona, in 1997.

Since she was 18 years old she has been involved in social programs dedicated to enhancing peoples' situations in marginal areas of Barcelona. She also has experience as a special education teacher, and working with immigrants.

Her main areas of interests are gender and migration, in particular in Europe. The Master in Latin American Studies at the University of Florida has represented for Yolanda the chance of exploring the disempowered condition of women in Latin and Mediterranean countries. The increasing immigrant populations in Spain and Italy – where she lived extensively before coming to the US – entails the need to social understanding and care of the invisible populations of migrants and minorities.