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# Seeking Better Life Chances by Crossing Borders: The Existential Paradox and Strategic Use of Italian Citizenship by Migrant Women

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*Based on long-term ethnographic fieldwork carried out in Naples (Italy) in the period 2014 to 2020, this article focuses on the rearticulation of the migration–citizenship nexus through a gender perspective. The article questions how migrant women exercise their agency despite the structural constraints that prevent their full inclusion and how they are able to cross and transgress the boundaries of citizenship and national belonging in search of better life opportunities. The data analyzed show the existential paradox linked to the migration–citizenship nexus that affects the lives of migrant women in Italy and their use of citizenship as a strategy to react to a blocked destiny, to follow one’s aspirations, and to rebalance gender relations. The article refines an integrated approach that considers the relationship between agency, aspiration, and capability as a broader theoretical framework within which to jointly study the dynamics of gender, migration, and citizenship as closely related, beyond the boundaries of fixed and opposite categories.*

## 1. Introduction

Borders play a central role in the discourse of States and nations: they are “privileged sites for the articulation of national distinctions” (Sahlins 1989, 271, as cited in Yuval-Davis et al. 2005, 522), differentiating between those who belong and those who do not belong to the national political community. The demarcation built on national borders has led to the fictitious opposition between citizens and migrants, considered as distinct terms of a binomial that defines people and situations in an oppositional manner: the citizen<sup>1</sup> as someone who belongs to a place; the migrant<sup>2</sup> as someone who moves from one place to another crossing its borders.

The media-political debates around this demarcation have intensified strongly and have assumed increasingly alarmist tones in conjunction with the so-called “refugee crisis” (Krzyżanowski et al. 2018), pervading and characterizing contemporary migration policy in an anti-migrant sense. Against migrants, generally perceived as problematic subjects that threaten the safety of national citizens, the States have adopted “selective and targeted” external border control system (Rumford 2006, 164) based on a visa policy that regulates mobility according to a global hierarchy of nationalities. Therefore, borders as “regulatory mobility

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filters" (Ribas-Mateos 2015, 159) are being opened and closed very selectively, maintaining a strong demarcation between the "deserving" and the "undeserving" to enter.

Rather than having disappeared or having lost their meaning, borders have been strengthened, moved, and reinvented (Mau 2020). In some parts of the world, such as the Schengen area, borders and internal border controls have been removed; in other places, the borders have been strengthened by erecting new walls, as in the case of Mexico-USA border or even the one recently erected on the border between Poland and Belarus. Border control has also moved away from the border line extending both internally and externally, becoming a "shifting border" (Shachar 2007, 2020).

Borders and border practices have become increasingly complex, ambivalent, and paradoxical (Mezzadra & Nielson 2013; Kolossov & Scott 2013). They structure and separate space and different social phenomena from each other and at the same time they pose the problem of their own identification to the point of denying their objective existence (Kolossov & Scott 2013). However, the "polysemy" and "heterogeneity" of borders, their "multiplicity, their hypothetical and fictive nature" does "not make them any less real" (Balibar as cited in Mezzadra and Nielson 2013, 4). On the contrary, they are strongly real for the consequences they determine in the lives of individuals—especially those of "unwanted" categories (such as migrants)—both in terms of freedom of movement and *life chances*.

Indeed, "unwanted" categories are not only rejected at the border but also after crossing it they are kept "in their place" within the social hierarchies, regardless of how long they have spent in a given country and how much they are integrated into a given society (Khosravi 2019, 9). For them, as the analysed case will show, also crossing the border of national citizenship through naturalization does not always coincide with better *life chances*. "The State is not only performed along the international border, but also in daily life, through the construction of the identities of citizens, non-citizens and partial citizens" (Mountz & Hyndman 2006, 452).

The theme of the effects of borders on individuals' daily lives reminds us to move the focus away from borders as locations and treat bordering more as a social process (Yuval-Davis et al. 2019). From this perspective, "borders are not only multiplying in space but also multiplying in time, as people are subjected to acts of everyday bordering at any time in daily life" (Gülzau et al. 2021, 11).

The border of national belonging on which the migrant-citizen opposition is built has also diverted attention from the internal borders of citizenship, as if all citizens were fully and equally included (Anderson 2019); on the contrary, citizenship is highly differentiated internally

and does not make all citizens equal. The intersection of different axes of differentiation (Crenshaw 1991) can determine the greater or lesser disadvantage of some categories over others. Among these, migrant women experience a double disadvantage (Kofman et al. 2000, 2005) as both women and non-citizens at the same time. Despite the quantitative and qualitative relevance of migrant women in contemporary migrations, their occupational segregation in care and domestic services contributed to the construction of their social and political invisibility (Campani 2011) and their partial citizenship (Parreñas 2015). According to a consolidated victimised paradigm, moreover, migrant women have long been considered passive citizens.

This article focuses on migrant women, analyzing how the intersection of gender with the migratory experience crosses the national citizenship boundaries after crossing the geographical borders of destination country. As will clearly emerge from the case study presented, the introduction of gender dimension by complexifying the migrant-citizen binomial allows us to grasp the multiplicity of intersections between citizenship and migration that would otherwise remain invisible.

In light of the foregoing, I wonder how migrant women exercise their *agency* despite structural constraints (such as restrictive migration policies and citizenship law, and also gender and care regimes), how they react to exclusion, how they cross and transgress the borders of citizenship and national belonging, what elements come into play in activating their *capacity* to act, and what the formal transition from migrant to citizen status entails for their *life chances*. In order to answer these questions, the paper is based on empirical data drawn from a long-term ethnographic fieldwork on migrant women's social and political participation that I carried out in Naples (Italy) between 2014 and 2021, in which subsequent follow-ups allowed me to follow the analysed subjects in their crossings territorial and status borders. The proposed analysis focuses on the biographical path of one of the research participants in her transition from "migrant" to "citizen" status.

Starting from the *biographical nodes* of the analysed case, I will discuss some relevant themes for migration, borders, and citizenship literatures and for migrants' lives: the crossing of borders to respond to one's wider *life aspirations*; the experience of *lived citizenship* (Lister 2007b) as a *struggle for recognition* (Bloemraad 2018); the *existential paradox of citizenship* (Pinelli 2009, 185; see also Ong 1999) and the *strategic* use of Italian *citizenship* to cross national borders again seeking for better *life chances* elsewhere. Before going into the details of the analysis, I first place the article within relevant bodies of literature in order to position and distinguish my approach. Next, I introduce the Italian context and present the research strategy and methodology. In light of the elements that emerged

from the analysis, in the conclusions I propose an integrated theoretical approach to jointly study gender, migration and citizenship, with the overarching aim of de-exceptionalizing migration and overcoming methodological nationalism.

## 2. A Synthetic-Relational Approach to Migration, Borders, and Citizenship

Not only politics but also social research with its “methodological nationalism” (Wimmer & Glick Schiller 2002) have contributed to the construction of the migrant–citizen opposition and to fuel the understanding of migration as a “problem” to be controlled and solved (Anderson 2019). Although scholars now recognize that migration and citizenship are inextricably and intimately tied to each other in complex ways, both conceptually and empirically, existing accounts often treat them separately or focus only on one of the two terms, at best emphasizing the implications of one for the other (Giugni & Grasso 2021). Furthermore, with reference to the issue of borders, if in the literature on migration it has found ample space and resonance, in the literature on citizenship it is little discussed, “even though borders have been at the core of the emergence of citizenship and, more broadly, are at the center of politics itself” (Cinalli & Jacobs 2020, 27). As Ambrosini and coauthors (2020) pointed out, “in the academic debate, respectively, migration, borders and citizenship have always been treated more as specialist topics, giving rise to different lines of research: migration studies, border studies, citizenship studies” (297). With this exception, migration and citizenship have rarely been treated jointly, which is the gap I attempt to bridge in this article.

Borders as “polysemic, multidimensional and fuzzy concept” are studied and perceived variously by many disciplines (Chattopadhyay 2019, 151; see also Brunet-Jailly 2011). Theories “related to borders—their power and functions, and the agencies impacting on borders and bordering—are multiple” (Paasi 2012, 2304). Studies with an interdisciplinary and multi-dimensional focus have also increased (Chattopadhyay 2019). Contrary to traditional scholarship, borders are now rarely conceptualized as separate socio-spatial entities or as a mere *line on a map*. In opposition to the current and dangerous anti-democratic drifts, several authors have proposed rethinking spatial borders in a critical way: “shifting borders” are conceived “as a creative resource at the service of human mobility and the protection of rights across borders rather than as a mere tool of exclusion” (Shachar 2020, 96) or as “global seams” (Cinalli & Jacobson 2020) that unite entities rather than divide them.

According to other authors, “borders are social facts that divide and rule people (...) and are written on human bodies: bodies carry borders but also make borders. (...) B/ordering separates but also brings together. Respectively, borders are open to contestations at the

level of the state and everyday life. State borders are scalar and function in complex ways in relation to local, regional, state-bound, and supranational processes” (Chattopadhyay 2019, 151) and involve both public and private life (Mountz & Hyndman 2006). In the light of this, the article focuses on the process of *otherizing* and *b/ordering* based on national citizenship, race, and gender (Chattopadhyay 2019), and on the *everyday bordering* (Yuval-Davis et al. 2019).

For the purposes of the analysis, I used the migrant–citizen nexus (Dahinden & Anderson 2021), that allows us to recompose the fracture—delineated along the border of national origin—between the opposite terms of this binomial, by analysing them jointly, highlighting their dynamic relationship, and revealing the fluid, mobile and porous nature of their border. Going in the direction of overcoming methodological nationalism, this synthetic-relational approach requires and produces new conceptual advances, capable of grasping different experiences of social life not enclosed exclusively in the nation-state.

To proceed in this theoretical-conceptual elaboration, the starting point is represented by the critical reflections on citizenship developed by feminist and migration scholars. Citizenship as a juridical status, conferred on all those who are full members of a community and which makes all citizens equal with respect to rights and duties (Marshall 1950), has shown its Janus-two-faced quality, opposing its general inclusive promise to its exclusive tendencies for both marginalized groups within the borders of nation-states and for those trying to move across them. The main theories of citizenship have developed on this antinomy (Balibar 2012), which can broadly be divided into two types: normative and empirical (Giugni & Grasso 2021, 4). Normative theories have focused on citizenship as a *status* with the aim of defining which rights and duties citizens should have, while empirical theories consider citizenship as a *practice* describing and explaining how citizens acquired these rights and duties.

From an analytical point of view, the formal dimension of citizenship, conceived as a legal status and the rights and duties connected to it, has been accompanied by its substantial dimension which translates citizenship into practices and acts of everyday life. Fundamental to this second line of studies was the contribution of Engin Isin and Greg Nielson (2008), who ask “what makes the citizen” rather than “who is the citizen”, and pioneered the conceptualization of “acts of citizenship”, arguing that the events performed by migrants themselves can constitute citizenship. This approach focuses on the agency of subjects and public acts of those who are “second class” citizens or non-citizens (Bloemraad 2018, 11). For this type of subjects, citizenship represents a “claim” to be accepted as full members of society (Bloemraad 2018, 11). In the words of Bloemraad (2018), “citizenship as claims-making is a relational process of recognition” (14).

From an operational point of view, the practice of citizenship understood as participation in the public sphere involves requests for recognition but also the ability to exercise the responsibilities of citizenship (Lister et al. 2007). In this perspective, citizenship develops in response to the exercise of *agency* by women and men, individually and collectively, through political associations and civil society (Lister 1997, 2003). Several authors have highlighted the manifold dimensions of citizenship (Shachar et al. 2017), even if they have treated them as "independent pillars holding up the citizenship edifice" (Bloemraad 2018, 4), underestimating that in subjects' life experiences they can be intertwined and reinforce each other. With respect to the "ongoing debates on whether citizenship is a status or a practice" (Isin 2009, 369), I argue that citizenship is both a status and a practice.

Since citizenship is not experienced by subjects as members of an abstract collective and as isolated individuals in the absence of relationships, but as members of a network of meaningful relationships, among which intimate and family ones take on particular importance (Bonjour & de Hart 2021), in my analysis I also introduced the intimate dimension of citizenship. As highlighted by feminist studies, in a more contextualized understanding of citizenship, as an embodied practice and daily lived experience, gender relations, family dynamics, sexuality, reproductive mechanisms, and the burden of care, are crucial elements for the construction of lived citizenship (Lister 2007). The concept of intimate citizenship highlights the crucial relationship between citizenship and intimate life: citizenship as a lived practice shapes and is shaped by intimate and family life (Plummer 2001; Roseneil et al. 2013).

Referring to migrant women, intimate citizenship can be used to illuminate the experiences and struggles of other marginal subjects (Cherubini 2017). The introduction of the intimate dimension of citizenship, as its constitutive dimension that intersects civic, social, and political citizenship and that concerns all subjects (Cherubini 2017, 204–205), allows for an enlargement of the boundaries within which it has been framed in the research on international migrations and the transformations of citizenship, leaving the public-private dichotomy and moving towards a synthetic understanding of it (Lister 1997, 2003; Lister et al. 2007). As will emerge from the case analysed, the public and the private define each other and derive meaning from each other. We cannot understand how migrant women entering and leaving the public sphere without taking into account the sexual division of labor within the private sphere and the relationship with one's partner. As a "potential bridge between the personal and the political", the intimate citizenship "sensitizes us to the imbrication between the public and private spheres" (Plummer 2003, 15, 68).

Based on feminist theory of citizenship, which proposed a synthesis of rights and participatory approaches to

citizenship (Lister 1997) rather than a binary approach, I chose to adopt a synthetic-relational approach to address the complex interrelation between the multiple facets of citizenship linked to crossing borders and migratory experiences. At the heart of this approach is the notion of *agency* (Lister 1997, 2003) understood as "transformative capacity" (Lister 2005, 19). This human *agency* allows to tie together the different dimensions of citizenship, which by intertwining and reinforcing each other can contribute to determining different *life chances*. This *agency* also emerges in the spaces left open by structural constraints (Ambrosini et al 2020) of borders, migration, gender, care, and citizenship regimes. As we will see from the case analysed, even if *agency* can be held back by discriminatory institutions and policies, acting as a citizen requires a sense of agency and in turn fosters the sense of agency as awareness of being able to act as a citizen (Lister 2003, 2005).

In my analysis I did not consider the role of *agency* in isolation, I also included *aspirations* (Appadurai 2004; Boccagni 2017; De Haas 2021), and *capabilities* (Näre 2014; see also Briones 2009). Migration process was analysed in two steps (Carling & Schewel 2018), in terms of *migration aspiration* and *migration ability* (Carling 2002) or *capability* (de Haas 2003). Likewise, citizenship in its configuration of status and practice was analysed in terms of both *aspiration* and *capability* (as ability to act as a citizen) (Baglioni 2020; Lister 2005). The use of an *agency-capacity-aspirations approach* allows us to jointly study the dynamics of gender, migration, borders, and citizenship, moving beyond deterministic and dualistic approaches.

### 3. Migrant women in the Italian context

Unlike other European countries, such as France, Germany, and the United Kingdom, Italy became a host country later and it was only in the 1990s that immigration began to be perceived as a mass phenomenon. In recent years the migrant population has increasingly become a structural component of Italian society. According to municipal population registers, in 2020 about 5 million foreign citizens are legally residents (8.5% of the total population living in the country), out of whom more than half are women (51.9%).

The feminization of migrations (Kofman 2004; Ehrenreich & Hochschild 2002) represented one of the most salient features of Italian immigration from the earliest stages. In the sixties, the first women to arrive in Italy were Somalis and Eritreans who followed the families of the settlers who returned to their homeland. Then, in the seventies, thanks to the mediation of the Catholic Church, women from Cape Verde, the Philippines, and Latin American arrived in Italy looking for work as domestic workers in upper-class families in large cities. During the 1990s, the immigration landscape changed dramatically with the arrival of Eastern European

women, further strengthening the female component. On one side, following a change in legislation, a large number of women arrived in Italy for family reunification purposes, rebalancing the gender percentages of some nationalities traditionally characterized by men; on the other, following the collapse of the communist regimes, many women arrived in Italy looking for work from the countries of the former Soviet bloc, making the Italian domestic work market more complex and competitive. By the beginning of the new millennium migrant women were mostly to be employed to care for the elderly population.

Today migrant women continue to be employed mostly in low-paying and low-skilled sectors and their situation has been described as a “frozen professional destiny” (Campani & Chiappelli 2014). Their position as domestic workers generally does not lead to “better” jobs and their role in domestic work quickly becomes a permanent occupation. Over time, the nationalities of the women working in this field has diversified but the working sector itself has not changed. In 2019, foreign women still represent 88.6% of domestic workers in Italy. In the same year, more than 50% of employed foreign women concentrated in only three professions—domestic services, personal care (40.6%), and office and shop cleaning—unlike foreign men who concentrated in thirteen activities (Idos 2020).

The needs of the Italian labor market (which depends on immigrant workers, especially women) is the basis of the structural gap between restrictive policies towards new entrants and selective expansion outcomes (Caponio & Cappiali 2018; Geddes & Pettrachin 2020), which characterizes Italian migration policies. According to this logic, a preferential entry channel has been created for migrant women employed in domestic and care work (Olivito 2016, 11). This paradox has strongly influenced the public discourse. That is, the focus on the highly “problematic nature” with which immigration is represented contrasting with the almost total invisibility of its female component, despite its numerical consistency. Unlike their male counterparts who are viewed as a political problem to be solved, migrant women are in fact mainly perceived as a discreet and useful presence in Italian society.

Beyond this form of indulgence, more restrictive rules have been introduced into the Italian legal system both in terms of family reunification and acquisition of citizenship by marriage with the intent of discouraging immigrant women from reuniting with other family members and from creating and caring for their families. This normative ambiguity has had the perverse effect of strengthening an “oppositional” representation of migrant women, as either self-supporting agents (when employed) or as vulnerable subjects and victims (when they are dependent on others). Thus, establishing a dichotomy that erases the complexity of their experiences.

Beyond this political and discursive ambiguity, immigrant women in Italy, as women, foreigners, and domestic workers, continue to experience marginal positions, multiple discriminations, and formal and informal exclusion within citizenship based on the intersection of gender, race, and class. In most cases, as workers, they fail to get out of the home care sector and move on to better positions. Furthermore, the transition to citizen status, with the rights and chances associated with it, does not happen quickly or easily. Even when formal citizenship is obtained, it does not perfectly coincide with symbolic membership in the citizenry (Bonjour & Block 2016).

Furthermore, the life of migrants is characterized by an “existential paradox of citizenship” (Pinelli 2009, 185; see also Ong 1999), which consists of the gap between substantial and formal citizenship, between real and desired life chances, that the acquisition of citizen status fails to fill.

Italian migratory history, characterized by mass emigration and only subsequently by the immigration of new populations, caused the delay in the formulation of the laws that regulate immigration and influenced the legislation on citizenship, which still closely anchored to the *jus sanguinis*. According to the Italian law (no. 91/1992), citizenship can be acquired by naturalization, demonstrating to have resided continuously and regularly in Italy for a minimum number of years (*jus domicilii*), which varies according to the applicant's status (ten years if a non-EU foreigner; five years if asylum seekers and stateless persons; four years if an EU citizen). Alternatively, citizenship can also be acquired by virtue of being married to an Italian citizen (*jus connubii*).

Compared to other European countries, the Italian citizenship legislation appears to be particularly restrictive (see Mipex Index: <https://www.mipex.eu>). Although at the beginning of 2020 the number of naturalized Italian citizens was 1.5 million, the majority of the people of foreign origin living in Italy do not have Italian citizenship. Without Italian citizenship they cannot vote and are unable to experience the same inclusion opportunities in the political arena. Civil society organizations, trade union, and ethnic associations continue to provide them with concrete opportunities for participation in political life, both locally and nationally. In the absence of legal citizen status, for many immigrants, organizational involvement represents a way to exercise one's political citizenship, to quest recognition, and claim their rights.

Looking at the literature on associationism, some main typologies have been identified: “charitable solidarity”, “claims and protection of rights”, “entrepreneurial planning”, “feminist intercultural” associations (Ambrosini 2005; Pojmann 2006; Tognetti Bordogna 2012). They are mainly characterized by three types of actions: the activities of integration and cultural promotion of migrants

in the receiving society; activities aimed at the country of origin, both transnational political engagement and international cooperation (Caselli 2008); actions to fight against racism and sexism. These general aims have been translated into specific actions: intercultural mediation; reception of migrants; learning Italian and their respective mother languages; support in handling administrative and bureaucratic procedures for renewal or conversion of residence permits and for the acquisition of Italian citizenship; and integration in the fields of school, work, health, and home (Idos 2014).

In this scenario, there is a lack of information regarding the civic participation of foreign women in Italy (Kosic & Triandafyllidou 2005) and there are still only a few studies on female migrant associations (Garofalo 2015; Pepe 2009). The latest national survey on migrant associations identified 2,114 immigrant associations (Idos 2014), without giving any thought to gender differences.

#### 4. Research strategy and case study presentation

The research carried out in Naples (2014–2021)<sup>3</sup> sought to reconstruct the civic and political participation of migrant women mobilized and visible in the public sphere, that is, those who "*won the competition for access to the public sphere and who ... made themselves known locally*" (Mantovan 2007, 117) in the role of leaders within organizations.

In 2014, I conducted a first mapping of immigrant associations<sup>4</sup> and, between 2018 and 2020, a follow-up to check which associations were still active. I identified twenty self-organized associations led by migrant women of different nationalities: Belarus, Ukraine, Russia, Bulgaria, Kyrgyzstan, Burkina Faso, Cape Verde, Ivory Coast, Somalia, Nigeria, Tunisia, Perù. I also carried out extended participant observation and biographical interviews with migrant leaders, integrating the organizational material with an ethnographic and biographical one. To reconstruct their biographical path, both individual and organizational, the leaders were met several times. From the biographical interviews, it emerges that most of the immigrant leaders have several characteristics in common: (1) a considerable number of years of stay in Italy; (2) an in-depth knowledge of the area; (3) a close network of relationships with natives who operate in the field of local immigration and who act as facilitators in accessing Italian institutions; in many cases, this includes a relationship with an Italian man; and (4) the foundation of her own association took place after at least ten years of settlement (Gatti 2016). For those who did manage to obtain Italian citizenship, it happened after almost twenty years of settlement (despite the required number of years being a maximum of ten in the case of non-EU citizens). As will be clear

from the case presented, visibility and mobilisation are the result of a process of empowerment, very often linked to the modification of biographical trajectories.

This article presents the main results of the broader ethnographic research, whose data collected support the discussion on the relationship between citizenship and migration. Furthermore, it includes an in-depth analyses of a single holistic case study, *atypical* of the others, to dialectically explore the migrant-citizen nexus (Dahinden & Anderson 2021) through a gender perspective. The case study analysed is that of Farhio, a Somali-born woman, who arrived in Italy in the 1980s with a co-resident domestic job. This element unites Farhio's migratory history to that of other Somali and non-Somali women who have immigrated to Italy for work since the 1960s within female migratory chains (Hochschild 2000, 2003). Thanks to the trade union engagement, Farhio was able to free herself from domestic work and in the 1990s she founded an ethnic association of which she became the president. In this role she became very active and visible in the local public sphere. Despite my predictions, when I tried to recontact her at the end of 2018 during the follow-up study I found that she had since become invisible in the local public sphere. I was finally able to connect with her directly via email and a phone call in the winter of 2019 and discovered she had moved to Berlin, Germany.

Farhio's case is the only one among the cases I analysed who made a second emigration after naturalization. Her migratory path shifted from the status of irregular immigrant to that of a foreigner legally residing in Italy, to that of a naturalized Italian citizen to finally that of an Italian citizen who emigrated to Germany.<sup>5</sup> This case allows us to explore in an integrated way the process that transforms a migrant woman into a citizen (in *practice* and by *status*) thus overcoming the migrant-citizen opposition.

The case of Farhio, as I will show, allows us to highlight that the different spheres of existence and the different dimensions of citizenship are in a dynamic relationship with each other, shaping each other. It highlights the dialectic between status and practice, between public and private, and the role that multiple positions and social relations play in it. Farhio's life story will show that citizenship cannot be seen in the binary terms of absence or presence of a status, much less a time before and after its acquisition, without considering other factors that contribute to structuring the *life chances* of the subjects.

Through the adoption of a single case strategy, this article aims to refine an integrated and comprehensive theoretical approach to jointly study the dynamics of gender, migration, border, and citizenship. This strategy allows us to better explore the many connections between the formal exclusion of non-citizenship, the multiple—and sometimes informal—exclusions within

citizenship, and the "transition" linking migration to citizenship, challenging the oppositions with which migrant women are generally represented.

## 5. Farhio's biography: the existential paradox and strategic use of citizenship.

Farhio is a Somali-born woman, the first of six children of a middle-class family. Her father worked for Alitalia,<sup>6</sup> the Italian airline, in Mogadishu and her villa was frequented by her father's Italian colleagues. Her migratory project had not matured in a context of poverty and deprivation. The father, in fact, was an enterprising man, who had risen to some autonomous activities in the transport and building sectors. On the contrary, her *migration aspiration* matured within a context that has favored an anticipatory socialization to the Italian language, society, and culture. She declared to have always loved Italy, which represented for her a *focus of aspirations* in itself, where to realize her aspiration to graduate in medicine.

I have always had love for Italy—because my father worked with Italians, with the airline Alitalia and with these Italians who often came to my house—and, once I got my diploma, I wanted to come and study here in Italy, but my parents did not agree. Then, insisting, they let me go. (Farhio, interviewed by author. Naples: 8 July 2016)

### 5.1. From the aspiration to study medicine to entrapment in housework

Contradicting her parents, in 1985, at the age of twenty, Farhio arrived in Naples,<sup>7</sup> following an international female migratory chain (Hochschild 2000; Decimo 2007), which put her in contact with the family where she worked as a housekeeper.<sup>8</sup>

I had a friend, a schoolmate, who had come to Naples to join her sister, who arrived with the independence of Somalia from Italy. She joined her sister, and I joined her. So, I came with already a job as a babysitter, with a family, I lived with them night and day, and they had two terrible little children, these children were always screaming, they were always in activity... I didn't spend much time with them because I was not well, because I worked so hard. The employer wanted to help me with my university enrollment. He told me: "bring me the documents!" but I went away. Then I found a job as a domestic worker, with a terrible woman, always "night and day" ... after a while I left there too ... after a while one person, who returned to Somalia, gave me her place, with an elderly couple, I spent some time... (Farhio, interviewed by author. Naples: 8 July 2016)

Having entered Italy with a visa, once it has expired, Farhio became illegal. Contrary to her aspirations, she experienced a form of entrapment within domestic work,<sup>9</sup> which for most immigrant women in Italy concerns

not only their work life but their entire existence. Farhio experienced the *paradox of migration*, that often the autonomy of choice is matched by a loss of power over one's life and the failure of the personal life project linked to migration.

After two years [from arrival], discouraged, I wanted to go back to Somalia, I said to myself—enough! I cannot handle it anymore! ... you know "day and night" is heavy, I lost my freedom ... so in 1987 I gave up the idea of staying and studying. But I met this boy and stayed ... and from there things took a different turn ... (Farhio, interviewed by author. Naples: 8 July 2016)

The beginning of the romantic relationship with an Italian man represents the first turning point in Farhio's biographical path. Thanks to the economic stability provided by this relationship, when her father came to Italy for medical treatment and she was the only one who could take care of him, she was able to not work for an extended period of time.

Even when this relationship ended, she never returned to Somalia, except for short visits to her parents, and she permanently left the co-resident domestic work sector. In the context of my research, the partnership with an Italian citizen—such as membership intermediary or gatekeeper—represent a decisive social resource in the paths of empowerment of migrant women. It often gives them the opportunity to leave their co-resident domestic work and, in some cases, not to work, as in the case of Farhio.

### 5.2. Making yourself a citizen by claiming rights

When the relationship with him ended, I got a job as an office cleaner, but I gave information at the entrance to the sales office, I prepared advertising material. But the employer was an ignorant person, very authoritarian, he humiliated... and I thought—the day when it will be my turn, listen! you cannot afford to tell me this ... and then it happened to me, so I went to the trade union office and said—listen! I want to go away, what should I do?—and they gave me the information I needed to end the employment relationship. I submitted a notice letter and left, then I filed the job suit for him, because he did not want to pay me. From there my relationship with the trade union was born. (Farhio, interviewed by author. Naples: 8 July 2016)

This excerpt from Farhio's story highlights her (citizenship) (cap)ability to put rights into practice in everyday life (Baglioni 2009). Farhio's account reveals the narrative of a woman who chooses to oppose the discrimination of her employer by claiming justice for herself. In this process of claiming, the trade union<sup>10</sup> played a decisive role in the new direction that her life took as did her relationship with one of the union leaders, a man who would eventually become her husband. Farhio was immediately involved in the organization's activities, also holding the role of head

of the Immigration Sector until 1997, when she distanced herself from it and she founded the Immigrant Workers' Federation (IWF), an autonomous union of immigrants on national base, gathered "in an independent association of political parties, bosses and, above all, traditional trade union confederations" (Statute of the IWF).

The discrimination and the difficulties suffered give her the impetus to fight not only for herself but also for other migrant workers employed in irregular, precarious, and exploited conditions. In a moment of rupture of the order, the daily bordering ends up expressing its transformative potential. The border from the space of oppression becomes the space of resistance from which it is possible to imagine alternatives and to change the conditions of the status quo for both oneself and for others (hooks 1989; Appadurai 2004; Mountz & Hyndman 2006). Subsequently, by founding its own ethnic association, this (citizenship) agency "is deployed in an ongoing process of struggle to defend, reinterpret and extend a range of citizenship rights and to fight for the recognition of various marginalised groups as full citizens" (Lister 2005 20; see also Bloemraad 2018). Claiming rights make her a citizen and acting as a citizen fosters her sense of agency citizenship.

In 1998, the establishment of the Register of associations for immigrants (art. 42 of lgs. n. 286/1998) gave Farhio the opportunity to set up also a voluntary association, New Somalia for Solidarity, of which she was president until 2016. The activities carried out by Farhio through her organization flourished for the ten years following their establishment. When I met Farhio the first time in 2014, she stated that her association had about five hundred registered members. Unlike the other self-organized associations led by migrant women, in which most of the members and the collective to which they refer are predominantly female, her association is the only one not to have a female basis. This element also differentiates it from the other three Somali associations present and still active in Naples.<sup>11</sup>

Farhio's case is also atypical because, despite being part of a first nucleus of associations born in Naples in the second half of the 1990s,<sup>12</sup> the associations she founded and led share a number of traits with younger foundations born after 2010. More specifically, the uniqueness of the individual path of their leaders (Gatti 2016) who is capable of interacting with local institutions while being supported by natives in the key roles of organization's activities (Saggiomo 2019). Among the main purposes of Farhio's association were the integration and social participation of migrants, the enhancement of the culture of origin, the fight against discrimination, legal protection, administrative assistance in the workplace and healthcare system, and intercultural mediation.

At the peak of her organizational career, Farhio was very visible in the local and national public sphere by participating in various initiatives, intervening in the

media, and holding various roles, thus performing daily citizenship even though she still lacked citizen's legal status. Citizenship practice raises awareness of one's citizenship agency and capability. The organizational involvement gave her the opportunity to start working as a linguistic-cultural mediator for local hospitals. Furthermore, she enrolled in a master's degree course on "Foreign Languages and Literature" at one of the Universities of Naples, where she also was appointed teacher of the Somali language.

Up to this point, she appears as a successful social and political inclusion path. She naturalized in 2005,<sup>13</sup> married her Italian partner in 2007 (with whom she had already lived since 2001) and gave birth to their children in 2009.

### *5.3. The existential paradox and strategic use of citizenship*

As I will show below, however, despite the acquisition of Italian citizenship generally representing the most powerful integration measure for migrants, it did not lead either to an improvement in Farhio's living conditions or to her greater and definitive rooting. Once she crossed the border of Italian citizenship, Farhio continued to experience the internal borders of citizenship as a black woman with a migratory background, more disadvantaged in access to resources and opportunities compared to native.

The birth of her twins radically changed Farhio's life path once again, ending organizational and work activities, which had characterized her life in the previous ten years.

I spent time and money for associations and trade unions... then with the pregnancy and the birth of the children I decreased... there are no institutional supports that work, even for native women, and it becomes even more complicated for foreign women.... I should have brought a relative to support me at least the first year (of the life of the children) ... but so I paid for it ... in fact it is a long time in which I feel unable to manage the children, time, and everything ... I have always worked ... until 2009 ... but having a precarious contract I had no rights ... and to this day I am still unemployed ... I am slowly recovering from the effort of raising two children alone ... in the meantime I am missing two exams to graduate... but I will have to do it, I must finish, because it's a shame not to finish... this is the situation... I have never lost the battle... I hope not to lose it now... I have to do it...(Farhio, interviewed by author. Naples: 8 July 2016)

The excerpt from Farhio's story highlights the difficulties encountered after the birth of children in the management and reconciliation of life and work times, highlighting the shortcomings of the Italian welfare state whose weight falls on women. While a native Italian woman would also need support in this case, for immigrant women the disadvantage is doubled. In the absence of



another woman in family and not having the economical possibility to hire a stranger, Farhio left both paid work and associative activity. With the arrival of the children, the partnership with an Italian citizen is transformed from a resource into an obstacle. In fact, the rigidity of gender roles means that childcare is completely left to the woman, leaving Farhio deprived of the time and energy to devote herself to something else. Farhio's story shows how, for migrant women, the border is located and reproduced not only in the workplace and in the public space, producing exploitation and invisibility, but also in the home, as "a place where the body is a border" (Mountz & Hyndman 2006, 455). On a daily basis, home ends up reproducing borders, as "inflections of the global in intimate space" (ibid, 454), leaving her—a black woman with a migratory background—in a position of subordination towards her native white partner, who exercises his power within the relationship by not giving collaboration and support in the management of home and childcare.

This imbalance produces a conflict that in most of the cases I have analysed has been resolved with the breakdown of the relationship. In the case of Farhio, on the other hand, where marriage and pregnancy were considered a choice of adulthood, the strategy was to try to recompose the relationship elsewhere. Also in this case, for Farhio, the (intimate) border from site of oppression becomes site of resistance with transformative power (Mountz & Hyndman 2006). The last time I met Farhio, she was really exhausted, aware of the "situation" but still able to resist, hope, and imagine a possible alternative future elsewhere. Comparing her life in Italy with that of the members of her diasporic family network,<sup>14</sup> she began to consider the possibility of moving to Germany where one of her sisters lives.

When I finally reached Farhio by phone in January 2019, she had already moved to Berlin with the whole family and had graduated, showing greater serenity and self-control. Her second migration project was a family migration and takes on the connotations of an emancipatory project in the intimate sphere. In fact, its realization entailed a re-adaptation and re-balancing of gender roles within the couple, greater collaboration in the care of children, and the release from the interference of the husband's ex-wife. At the same time, however, it led to the definitive abandonment of her organizational engagement and the disappearance of the associations she founded, even if during our telephone conversation her words gave a glimpse of the hope and the desire to resume the organizational involvement also in Germany. Farhio said: "Let's see if we can do some movement for immigrants here too!" (Farhio, interviewed by author. Telephone interview: 9 Jan 2019), showing once again the capacity to adapt to the existing situation, to aspire and imagine a different future.

The acquisition of Italian citizenship and the enlargement of the rights connected to it failed to translate into more

and better *life chances*. Rather, instead of being a source of stability and the final stage of a path of full inclusion in Italy, citizenship becomes for Farhio a "facilitator of mobility, capable of making real other forces that are above all personal and linked to its social networks" (Pinelli 2009, 185) and most of all a strategy for a new life project elsewhere. The power of citizenship, linked to the capability to move freely in the EU, thanks to the Italian passport, gives the opportunity, the freedom, and the capability to act, making practicable the imagined alternative life.

Faced with the existential paradox of citizenship that she finds herself living in, Farhio reacts by strategically using Italian citizenship—and the migratory capability connected to it—as a form of (intrinsic) agency and capability with which to create better living conditions for herself and for her family. In Farhio's case, the second migration is based on an experience of vulnerability, of the loss of power over one's life, which is closely intertwined with the experience of migration, motherhood, and the asymmetrical relationship with the partner. At the same time, it is influenced by the family diasporic condition and the transnational sociability connected to it,<sup>15</sup> together with the transformative power of *agency*, the *capacity to aspire* to a better life and a different future elsewhere, and the capability to act make this aspiration actual.

## 6. Conclusions

By exploring the multiple interconnections between migration, borders, and citizenship, Farhio's story allows us to deconstruct the oppositional dichotomies with which migrant women are generally represented in public discourse. She is not a victim at all, nor a "resistant self-referential heroine" (Colombo & Rebughini 2016, 450), but a woman capable of imagining alternative possible worlds and futures (hooks 1989; Appadurai 2004). Vulnerability and agency coexist; and agency emerges at the intersection of social categories in the relationship with structural constraints and situational opportunities, and with the other actors present in the context, opening spaces for adaptation, resistance, and change (Näre 2014). Her action is connected to and is a consequence of her social positions within the context and of a temporally and spatially specific situation, which changes over time following the course of her life, as a result of a complex intertwining of structural, relational, personal, and familiar factors.

Farhio's account shows that, although citizenship remains a key aspiration for those who lack its full or partial protections, it does not determine better living conditions for migrant women and may not represent the ultimate horizon. If it is clear that a stratified system of rights corresponds to an inequality of life chances, the details of Farhio's biographical path made it possible to underline that the choice to make a second migration after naturalization is not linked only to structural factors

and (the lack of) opportunities provided by the Italian context. The motivation behind the individual choice matures in a complex interweaving of macro, meso, and micro factors, including elements concerning the course of life, intimate and family relationships, diasporic network, the loss of power over one's existence, and the desire to regain it are inserted. Contrary to what one could imagine, having a native partner and young children born in Italy does not represent a major root cause through naturalization; on the contrary, acquired Italian citizenship is used as a precise strategy to regain the power to act on one's existence, rebalance the couple's relationship, and follow one's personal and family aspirations. The *strategic use* of citizenship by migrant women represents a form of agency and capability to resist adverse conditions, to react to the *existential paradox* of citizenship, and to seek better life chances.

The story of Farhio, today an Italian citizen of foreign origin who emigrated abroad, allows us to highlight how the different life chances are linked to the intersection of different spheres of existence, that public and private life are not separate but closely linked, that migration and citizenship are in a dialectical relationship, and that the different dimensions of citizenship contribute to determining different life chances. The analysis of Farhio's biography, which is at the same time a story of emigration, immigration, settlement, participation, citizenship, and new emigration, challenging and undoing the binary system on which gender, migration, borders, and citizenship have been historically theorized, invites us to conceptualize their dynamic relationship as a spectrum rather than an opposition and to struggle for the "massive uprooting of dualistic thinking" (Anzaldúa 1987, 102). It highlights the ambivalence and contradictoriness of citizenship for migrant women, which is at the same time an instrument of inclusion and exclusion (Lister 1997, 2003; Werbner & Yuval-Davis 1999; Isin 2009), both domination and empowerment (Isin 2009, 369), rooting in the host country and mobility (Finotelli et al. 2018), to the construction of which both positions of power and resistance contribute. Therefore, the migrant-citizen nexus used to better explore the everyday bordering experiences of migrant women offers a deconstruction of the border, remolding it into a concept used not to divide but to connect and create.

The proposed analysis highlights how the introduction of a gender perspective can profitably enrich the joint study of migration, borders, and citizenship by raising new questions for the study of social and political categories and by encouraging the development of broader theoretical frameworks, which allows to link the theories between them. An integrated theoretical framework could contribute to the process of de-exceptionalizing migration, of de-essentializing of social identities, and de-centering migration and citizenship research (Dahinden 2016; Fischer & Dahinden 2017; Anderson 2019; Dahinden & Anderson 2021).

As emerges from this case study, the integration of *agency—aspirations—capabilities approach* can contribute to the advancement in the joint study of gender, migration, borders, and citizenship beyond the binarisms. Indeed, the *aspirations* and *capabilities* to migrate and participate as citizens are both a function of people's general aspirations for a better life, of the structures of opportunity/constraints of the context and of the relationships with other actors in the different dimensions of existence. Shifting the focus of research on migration and citizenship from the national border as the only vector to larger and more complex constructs, such as the attempt made in this article, would push the social sciences to move beyond the boundaries of methodological nationalism by broadening the horizons of the (sociological) imagination.

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## Notes

- 1 That of citizen, like that of citizenship, is a polysemic and ubiquitous concept. As such, it may appear unclear and lend itself to different interpretations, depending on disciplinary perspectives and national contexts. We refer to citizenship on the basis of nationality with reference to the Italian context, in which the demarcation between citizen and non-citizen is still very clear-cut from a formal point of view.
- 2 The UN Migration Agency (IOM) defines a migrant as any "person who moves away from his or her place of usual residence, whether within a country or across an international border, temporarily or permanently, and for a variety of reasons. The term includes a number of well-defined legal categories of people, such as migrant workers; persons whose particular types of movements are legally defined, such as smuggled migrants; as well as those whose status or means of movement are not specifically defined under international law, such as international students".
- 3 This is the doctoral research that merged into the thesis entitled "Gender, migration and citizenship. The civic and political participation of migrant women in Italy. The case of Naples" discussed at the Department of Social Sciences of the University of Naples Federico II in July 2021.

- 4 The results of this first mapping are included in the research report of Idos (2014) on migrant associationism. From this first survey it appears that the Campania region is the seventh Italian region for the number of immigrant associations and is the only region of Southern Italy with more than 100 associations (105, 5.0% of the national total). Of these, 70.5% of the associations are concentrated in the province of Naples.
- 5 Germany represented one of the historical destinations and is still one of the main current destinations of Italian emigration flow (see Pugliese 2018).
- 6 Italy and Somalia are linked by a long-shared history: Italy occupied Somalia from 1889 to 1941 as a colonial power; between 1950 and 1960, Italy played the role of "guardian" of Somalia on behalf of the United Nations; and, in the following years, Italy was Somalia's main trading partner and the country most involved in the construction of its infrastructure (Decimo 2007).
- 7 Somali is one of the historical communities of Naples and Somali women were among the first to arrive in the 1960s. However, the presence of Somalis in Naples has significantly decreased since the 1980s and 1990s until today (167 persons: 51% women). Many emigrated to places that offered them greater employment opportunities and protection in terms of welfare, including Germany, England, Holland and Sweden or even other cities in Northern Italy.
- 8 Italy is one of the European countries that has attracted significant Somali migration, consisting mainly of single women employed in the lowest level of the care labor market. The Somali diaspora in Italy is anchored in integrated solidarity networks created by immigrant women who have already settled in Italy. The recruitment of female labor for employment in the niches of the Italian domestic and care labor market takes place through these networks.
- 9 With few exceptions, the participants in my research, despite their leadership roles and their educational attainment, continue to work as domestic workers even if part-time due to their economic autonomy.
- 10 In Italy, as well as in other contexts, participation in trade unions, associations, or political movements, represents for migrants an important channel for participating to the wider political community, like any other citizen, and performing citizenship even if formally non-citizen (see: Martiniello 2005; Ambrosini 2016).
- 11 The Iskafiri Association, founded in 1998; the Somali Community Association in Italy and the Somali Women's Community Association, both founded in the first decade of the 2000s.
- 12 The development of immigrant associations has followed the trend of migratory flows and legislative changes on migration. The first formal associations appeared in Naples in the early 1990s, favored by the establishment of the first Italian immigration law (n. 943/1986), with a strong acceleration between the end of the 1990s and the early 2000s, reflecting both the increase in female flow and the reorganization in the matter of immigration brought

about by the "Turco-Napolitano" law (l. n. 40/1998), the establishment of the Register of associations operating in favor of immigrants (art. 42 of lgs. n. 286/1998) and the affirmation of the right to create their own associations introduced with the ratification of the Convention on the participation of foreign citizens in public life at the local level in the Italian legal system in 2000. A new push to join was recorded after 2010, with the establishment of the regional register of associations in favor of foreign people and the regional council for immigration in which representatives of the same associations could participate (law Campania n. 6 of 2010).

- 13 Farhio, like the other women interviewed, acquired Italian citizenship about 20 years after arriving in Italy. In fact, one often stays in Italy for long periods working without a regular employment contract or residence permit, extending the time required by law to apply for Italian citizenship.
- 14 The brother and sisters had all emigrated from Somalia to other European countries and United States.
- 15 Don't forget the importance of having a sister in Germany, which motivated her to move to Berlin.

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