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'Entirely white'? Female immigrants and domestic work in Italy (1960s–1970s)

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Abstract

Recently, a renewed history of foreign immigration in Italy, focusing on the very first migration flows after the Second World War, has offered a more appropriate periodisation of the phenomenon. Women have been at the forefront of these flows, which were initially determined by the new post-colonial setting of the former Italian colonies (Eritrea, Somalia and Ethiopia). Subsequently, the immigrants came from various other countries (Spain, Cape Verde, Portugal, El Salvador, Peru, Philippines, Sri Lanka, Ceylon, India, Bangladesh, Pakistan). At the same time, the majority of them were employed in a specific sector of the labour market: domestic work. This article focuses on female immigrants who were employed as domestic workers, their presence in public discourse in Italy in the 1960s and 1970s, and government policies in this area. Drawing on statistical data and surveys, press and audiovisual materials, and feminist theory and practices, it aims to analyse the construction of paradigms – visibility, invisibility, subalternity, rights and racialisation – associated with female immigration and domestic work as a specific sector of employment.

Keywords: immigration; female immigration; domestic workers; Italy

Introduction

'In the whole decade, you will not meet a single immigrant. That's because they weren't there. At that time, Italy was entirely white' (Deaglio 2018, 20).[1] This is how the journalist Enrico Deaglio opened his comprehensive book on the decade 1967–77. But was Italy really 'entirely white' in that decade? Until a few years ago the majority of scholars have considered migration to Italy as a phenomenon worthy of attention starting in the 1980s.

Heather Merrill, for example, locates the transformation of Italy into a country of immigration (particularly from Africa) in the late 1970s (2018, 26–38) and links this shift to a new and unprecedented awareness of the colonial past and its history. Donald Martin Carter, in a study on the Senegalese community in Italy, writes that in the early 1990s, immigration was a 'new phenomenon' (1997, ix). This interpretation, which is shared by many scholars, may depend on the fact that, during the 1960s and 1970s, there were fewer immigrants in Italy. It may also depend on the desperate search for a transition, a 'transformation', or a clearly identifiable break that changed Italy from

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a country of emigration to a country of immigration. It is true that the signing of the Schengen agreement by Italy, which did not happen until 1990, along with the fall of the Berlin Wall in 1989 and the dissolution of the Soviet Union, opened up a period in which migration became more substantial. Nevertheless, since the 1960s and 1970s, there have been significant traces of immigration that deserve to be studied in detail.

Of course, some historians have studied the early presence of foreigners in Italy and the policies that regulated this presence (Einaudi 2007; Marchetti 2014). More recently, some authors (Colucci 2018, 2016; Ballinger 2020; Berhe 2023) have fully included Italy in the circuits of international migration as an arrival – but not necessarily final – destination since the end of the Second World War. By identifying a more appropriate and nuanced periodisation of foreign immigration, they shed light on the most crucial junctures in the history of Italy – and their global dimension – in the second half of the twentieth century. This approach makes it possible to grasp the structural dimension of migration in the Italian case and to identify some useful links between migratory processes and the transformations of arrival and departure societies.

This article shows, first, that migration processes are embedded in macro- and microeconomic changes, the labour market, welfare models, social, cultural and mental landscapes, and the relationship between individuals and institutions. Second, it aims to explore the uncertain status of paid 'domestic work' and 'domestic workers', also increasingly called 'household workers', when their condition is linked to a history of migration. Above all, it seeks to answer the following question: can paid domestic work be considered work? This question is relevant because domestic workers universally embody the figure of the low-skilled, undervalued, precarious, hidden and unorganised worker. In general, domestic workers provide personal and domestic care in the context of a formal or informal employment relationship, meaning that they work for one or more households in return for a wage or other form of compensation. The jobs and tasks that are considered to be included in domestic work vary from country to country: workers may cook, clean, do the laundry and ironing, care for children, the elderly and the disabled, look after the garden or pets, or drive the family car. They may work part-time, full-time or on an hourly basis, and they may or may not live in the employer's home. However, domestic work is defined by the place of work, which is the family. The migrant domestic worker, in particular, depends on the family. The family, rather than the corporate nature of employers, and the seemingly 'private' nature of the home can explain the uncertain status of this form of labour.

However, these intertwined perspectives tend to be absent from a generally poor and reductive understanding of migration, and of migrant women in particular, as no more than an endless emergency, despite the many studies and the legacy of an important historiographical strand. An analysis of female immigration – a topic that is closely linked to domestic work – is essential to reconsider the established periodisation. Cape Verdean migration to Italy is a good example. Jacqueline Andall has very aptly noted that one of its most important characteristics was that of being precocious. Indeed, the mobility of the majority of single women who left the Cape Verde islands in the 1960s and largely flowed into the domestic work sector is crucial, 'as it signalled Italy's transition into a country of immigration' (Andall 2008, 81).

Focusing on the strong presence of women in the domestic work sector, I reconsider the still widespread belief that Italy in the 1960s and 1970s was entirely 'white' – a social construct that has dominated and still dominates public discourse and debates on migration – and outside the international migratory circuits. I aim to understand how women's work outside and inside the home was determined and given a new meaning during a period of transition, when immigration was one of the main but long-ignored changes, especially in the case of women.

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This article is divided into four sections. The first concerns the initial phase of female immigration, its new orientations and the first extensive investigations carried out on this wave of immigration (1963–79). The second section analyses a series of circulars issued to 'regularise' unauthorised domestic workers. The third section is an in-depth study of the case of Rome. The fourth section is dedicated to exploring the impact of the high percentage of women employed in the domestic sector on narratives and assessments of female migration. This examination delves into issues of racialisation, de-politicisation and the construction of oversimplified dichotomies such as public/private, visibility/invisibility and subalternity/rights. My analysis draws on the following sources: the *Rapporto sui lavoratori stranieri in Italia* (Report on Foreign Workers in Italy) from the Centro Studi Investimenti Sociali (CENSIS), published in 1979; the widespread survey carried out in Rome by the Ente Confederale Addestramento Professionale (ECAP) of the Confederazione Generale Italiana del Lavoro (CGIL) in collaboration with the Centro Studi Emigrazione Immigrazione (EMIM) on a sample of 431 interviews collected between December 1979 and December 1980; and a survey by Father Erminio Crippa presented by the Associazione Professionale Italiana Collaboratori Familiari (API/COLF) at its national congress in 1976. In addition to these sources, I have consulted the daily press and periodicals, including the feminist press. The statistical data and surveys, press and audiovisual materials help us to understand the construction of paradigms related to female immigration and to a specific labour sector: domestic work.

The early stage: new guidelines and the first extensive survey (1963–79)

During the Cold War, Italy was part of a composite international mobility. Mobility became much more significant starting in the second half of the 1960s. The initial and most decisive phase covers the period between two key moments: 1963, the year in which the Ministry of Labour and Social Security issued circular no. 51 with the aim of establishing, for the first time, guidelines for the recruitment of foreign workers; and 1979, when CENSIS published the *Rapporto sui lavoratori stranieri in Italia*, at the request of the government, in the context of what can be considered the 'first widespread public debate on the subject' (Colucci 2016, 948). It is worth noting how, during this phase, political interventions and coverage in newspapers and magazines increased markedly.

The CENSIS survey estimated that there were between 70,000 and 100,000 foreign domestic workers in Italy. According to an estimate by API/COLF,[2] there were at least 100,000 'foreigners', of whom only 20 per cent had a valid residence permit at the end of 1979.[3] Data from the Istituto Nazionale di Previdenza Sociale (INPS), on the other hand, tell us that there were 17,750 domestic workers in Italy in 1978 and 20,015 in 1979, while data from the Ministry of the Interior set the figure at 12,104 in 1978 and 14,415 in 1979.[4] The data were published in the proceedings of the 'Giornata di studio su l'immigrazione straniera in Italia', held on 22 March 1983 and organised by the Comitato Italiano per lo Studio dei Problemi della Popolazione (CISP) and the Institute of Demography of the 'La Sapienza' University of Rome; this was one of the first attempts to systematise the scattered and often discordant information on foreign domestic work in Italy. It is worth pointing out that in this attempt to organise the data provided by INPS and the Ministry of the Interior, only the data on domestic workers are discussed separately from the overall information on the 'foreign population'. The regions with the highest numbers of immigrant domestic workers are, in descending order, Lazio, Lombardy, Tuscany, Friuli Venezia Giulia and Piedmont.

These contradictory data raise two important points: insufficient knowledge of the phenomenon and the undeniable presence of immigrant women, almost all employed in one sector. When considering these new migratory movements towards Italy during

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the 1960s, we can identify a number of important migration flows. One was the result of the new postcolonial phase and was made up of Somali, Eritrean and Ethiopian women, who, due to their colonial past, looked towards Italy as a landing place.[5] After 1941, with the upheavals caused by the Second World War and the fall of Fascism, the Italians lost control of Eritrea. It was placed under British administration until 1952, when it became part of a federation with Ethiopia, as established by a controversial United Nations resolution. The Ethiopian Emperor Haile Selassie then abolished Eritrea's autonomous status and annexed it as a province in 1962. Subsequently, a period of armed conflict began in Eritrea, during which guerrilla warfare was waged against the occupiers. The fighters for independence were mainly organised in two groups: the Eritrean Liberation Front and the Eritrean People's Liberation Front. After Selassie's dethronement in September 1974 by the Derg military junta, the conditions of the Eritrean population quickly deteriorated. At the beginning of 1975, the struggle for independence turned into a fully fledged war and even took on a more urban dimension, with battles, bombings and persecutions in the city of Asmara. The situation deteriorated in 1977, with the rise of Mengistu Haile Mariam and the beginning of the worst phase of the conflict, known as the Red Terror (Marcus 1994, 195–201).

As a result, Eritrean migration reached a peak in the mid-1970s, when clashes with Ethiopia became increasingly bitter and the economic crisis began to hit harder. It mainly involved young, well-educated men who later decided to leave Italy, as it offered only temporary work permits and underpaid jobs that were inadequate to their qualifications. However, this migratory flow also included women with medium to low education levels who arrived in Italy as domestic workers. In some cases, they took advantage of networks set up by women who had already arrived in Italy in the 1950s, following the departure of Italian families from Eritrea.[6]

Postcolonial dynamics alone cannot explain migration flows, the causes of which are much more complex. In the years of the economic boom, these flows increased to such an extent that the so-called 'second wave' of immigration has been identified precisely with that of 'foreign domestic workers' – a migratory wave that has been defined as 'the vanguard of the transformation of the Italian labour market' (Einaudi 2007, 85). An investigative report of 1972 uses a highly simplified description of the arrival channels. According to its author, only 'religious institutions or diplomatic representations' acted as mediators (*La Stampa* 1972). As early as 1972, it became clear that it was extremely difficult to control arrivals and that irregular border crossings remained frequent. A survey by Father Erminio Crippa, which API/COLF presented at its national congress in 1976, revealed that there were about 50,000 foreign women workers in the sector (Crippa 1979, 26–27). According to Crippa, the main segment consisted of Catalans, Navarrese and Asturians, linked to diplomats and their families and concentrated in Rome, Milan and – albeit in smaller numbers – Venice. There were only 11,000 to 12,000 Ethiopians, mostly from Eritrea, about half of whom did not have a regular residence permit. There were also arrivals from the other former Italian colony, Somalia; from predominantly Catholic countries such as the Philippines and Cape Verde; and from the Indian subcontinent (Sri Lanka, Ceylon, India, Bangladesh and Pakistan). In 1976, approximately 12,000 Ethiopians, 7,000 Filipinas from Philippines and 6,200 Cape Verdeans and Mauritians resided in Italy.

Although this 'wave' is usually explained from an economic perspective (i.e. in terms of the search for job opportunities), the reasons that triggered this mobility are much more complex. Many of these women declared that they had moved to Italy to marry men who had not been accepted by their families, to avoid imposed marriages, to escape civil war in their homeland (in the case of Eritrea and Nicaragua), or because they had illegitimate children. A large part of the survey investigates migratory networks or chains that

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activated mobility: friendship chains or networks were decisive (47 per cent), followed by agencies (33.3 per cent), Catholic missions (13.7 per cent), direct contact with an employer (1.9 per cent) and staff from embassies (1.9 per cent). Strangely enough, the survey makes no mention of the eight patronages authorised by law no. 339 of 2 April 1958, with a regular ministerial decree, to carry out job placement activities as channels of migration (Crippa 1979, 17). The agencies regularly operated on an international level, with complex procedures and legal offices in countries whose legislation was more liberal (Italian law prohibited mediation in employment contracts) (Salvini 1980, 403).[7] Immigrants also often used a residence permit for tourism, or they had recourse to unauthorised intermediaries. In the 1970s, in particular, this latter modality hegemonised narratives and newspaper coverage of migration.

This passive image of the migrants, sometimes justified by the suggestion that their qualifications did not emancipate them, further humiliated these women. The public and media discourse underestimated the agency of these migrant women and the multifariousness of their relationships, as well as their ability to find opportunities, even unexpected ones. An interesting example is the migration flow from the Cape Verde islands, which regarded only migrant women. While the mobility of Cape Verdean women towards Italy in the early 1960s is still attributed exclusively to the mediation of the Capuchin mission, the girls – who left an archipelago of ten islands that gained independence from Portugal in 1975 – took advantage of various opportunities to set their migratory project in motion, as when pilots from the national airline Alitalia brought two local girls to Italy to work as maids. This story has been told in the documentary *Mariscica fu la prima* by Annamaria Gallone,[8] which presents a series of interviews with Cape Verdean women who returned to their homeland thanks to their savings and the pension accrued after spending decades in Italy. By 1975, no fewer than 6,000 arrivals from the Cape Verde islands were registered 'only in Rome' (*La Stampa* 1975a).

The *sanatoria* policy: a long-time habit that began with domestic workers

Although the period spanning from 1961 to 1989 has been described as one of 'immigration without policy' (Einaudi 2007, 85–87), the institutions increasingly began to consider the need to regulate the recruitment and placement of migrants in a sector as difficult to control as domestic work.

A series of circulars were issued, creating a condition of recurring amnesty (*sanatoria*) triggered by the intention to 'regularise' the unauthorised domestic workers (Colombo and Sciortino 2004, 53; Colucci 2016, 951–952; Einaudi 2007, 107; Sarti 2010b). These provisions did not limit the arrival of migrants, let alone resolve their irregularity.[9] For example, at the end of the 1970s, the Palermo police headquarters claimed to have granted 300 residence permits, but the actual number of immigrants was more than 1,500. In statistics reporting figures by country of origin, some groups are clearly identifiable because they are particularly numerous, while others could not be easily taken into account. These groups were mainly concentrated in Milan, Rome, Varese, Brescia and Venice. According to the same sources, some 7,000 Filipinas and Filipinos lived in Rome, Ancona, Milan, Naples, Turin, Lecce, Bari, Rieti and so on, only half of whom had valid residence visas. About 6,000 domestic helpers came from the Cape Verde islands and a few thousand from smaller countries such as Mauritius, Sri Lanka, El Salvador, Seychelles, Costa Rica, Ecuador, Nicaragua and Guatemala (Salvini 1980, 401). Migration studies have convincingly shown that migrants coming from the same country tend to concentrate in the same areas. The *colf* (domestic workers) from El Salvador, for example, were concentrated in the provinces of Milan and Varese (Salvini 1980, 401).

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The national collective agreement for domestic workers was as valid for immigrant women as it was for Italian women, provided they had a regular work permit. Therefore, they were all subject to the same rules on minimum wages, increases set by the Joint Commission, overtime, working hours and rest periods, holidays and severance pay. In 1974, the national collective agreement for domestic workers was established, which, for the first time, guaranteed mandatory minimum standards and wages. At the end of the 1970s, the minimum wage was 185,000 lire per month (13 salaries per year) plus board and lodging for the highest of the three categories; in the larger cities, though, it was very easy to obtain higher wages, generally around 300,000 lire per month (sometimes as much as 400,000), plus board and lodging, even though social security contributions were paid based on only the minimum wage if they were paid at all (Salvini 1980, 404). In order to assert their rights, some domestic workers resorted to self-dismissals, quitting their jobs:

> Which, in the presence of great demand, became a real right to strike. In fact, among certain social classes, the demand for domestic help seems to resist every economic crisis, the continuous salary and social security contribution increments, and the decrease in non-domestic work for many women, who have been driven back home by the economic crisis. (Salvini 1980, 404)

Immigrant women could not exert this kind of pressure, because losing work and housing would put them in enormous difficulties or in a situation of illegality. One must also consider that legislation was a tangle of sometimes contradictory rules; more importantly, a migrant woman in Italy normally received a residence permit only if she was employed in domestic service. Although some migrants found 'other employment, or as service staff in institutions (rather than families)', the Italian authorities refused to grant them the necessary authorisation to be hired 'because these are jobs that Italian citizens are still willing to do and the trade unions themselves are opposed to the loss of jobs in which fellow countrymen could be employed' (Salvini 1980, 406). Up to that point, the migrants' irregular status did not prevent them from obtaining legal protection (but certainly made it more difficult), including by means of a contract, but they were constantly exposed to the risk of expulsion. Many women entered Italy as tourists and then stayed on through undeclared work – that is, without the social security, guarantees and protection provided by law (Betti 1979).

In December 1979, the Italian government issued a new circular that sought to remedy the existing situation and to establish rules for the future to regulate this complex matter. However, in the first months of application, there were cases of domestic workers whose passports had not been stamped and who therefore could not prove that they had entered Italy before the date of the circular. In addition, the provisions concerning amnesty were not entirely clear and were applied unevenly by the various police headquarters. Doubts remained as to whether the official channels could function effectively while the agencies continued to operate, cleverly circumventing the prohibitions. In the first months after the circular, the arrival of new illegal immigrants did not seem to stop. Prior to the government's intervention, trade unions, private individuals and religious bodies had taken many – though fragmentary – initiatives in this area. The autonomous union Federcolf put foreign domestic workers on an equal footing with Italian ones, 'providing assistance or legal advice if necessary' and 'cataloguing the case law on the effectiveness of the collective agreement, which was successfully applied to both regular and irregular foreign domestic workers' (Salvini 1980, 407).

On 9 November 1975, in an article entitled 'Queste beneamate colf', the daily newspaper *La Stampa* gave a preview of a detailed survey by the Associazioni Cristiane

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Lavoratori Italiani (ACLI) on the human and working conditions of the country's more than 800,000 female domestic workers – 12 per cent of all working women. It was estimated that about 200,000 of them were irregular. The text was accompanied by a photograph with the caption 'Coloured maids strolling through Porta Nuova'. The working conditions of domestic workers, which were hardly recognised in general, were even more difficult when it came to black domestic workers, the journalist wrote:

> In Italy, there are about 40,000 of them, and in Turin just over 200. Some are Somalis, very few Nigerians, Indians and Mauritians, less than a dozen from the Seychelles and Cape Verde, 35 from the Philippines, 50 from Eritrea. The Europeans amount to almost 2,000: French, English and German, mainly housekeepers, nurses and maids. Coloured maids arrive in Italy through authorised agencies, through outlawed organisations or hired directly by families who spent their holidays in Third World countries. (*La Stampa* 1975b)

Witnessing a condition: the case of Rome

In the conclusions to an expanded edition of the book *Roma Moderna*, Italo Insolera (2011, 369) claimed that the 'new immigration' to the capital began in the mid-1980s. Nevertheless, the number of residence permits for work purposes in Rome had already risen from 8,443 in 1969 to 21,315 in 1980 (Bortot 1981, 17).[10]

A survey carried out in Rome by the ECAP in collaboration with the EMIM, on a sample of 431 interviews collected between December 1979 and December 1980, attested to the marked presence of immigrant women in Rome (ECAP-CGIL and EMIM 1980). The ECAP research, divided into four parts, painted a portrait of immigrants characterised by heterogeneity of countries of origin, an almost equal gender distribution between males and females, and an age structure skewed towards average levels but still within the working age range. The study also revealed a 'majority [of immigrants] with medium-high education … with female accountants, nurses, schoolteachers engaged in domestic work, while male graduates were found in unskilled jobs such as restaurants or garages'. This configuration of the foreigner's profile was innovative with respect to the interpretations produced up to that time because it was able to question, on the basis of data and information, some of the most widespread assumptions regarding the early phases of immigration. These interpretations, focusing on more visible and organised sectors of the labour market, paid almost sole attention to male migrants (Di Sanzo 2023).

This was one of the first overall surveys to highlight the presence of women, especially in the domestic work sector. It revealed that 'Eritrean, Tigrayan, Ethiopian, Filipino, Somali and Cape Verdean' nationalities – that is, those with almost exclusively female immigrant communities – accounted for 61.5 per cent of the total number of immigrants. Moreover, the very method of the survey, which identified 'meeting places' in order to distribute the questionnaires through a 'chain' procedure, signals not only their presence but also their inclusion in relationship and sociability networks.

The characteristics of immigration to Rome (in both qualitative and quantitative terms) depended, first of all, on the characteristics of migration flows. There was a demand in Rome and there were occupational spaces that shaped migration flows. Among these, there was a significant demand for domestic work. There was a comparison that migrants made not only between the working conditions in their country of origin and those in the host country but also between the working conditions of different destination countries (e.g. between domestic work in the Philippines and in England or Italy). To explain the mechanism of selection (and thus why and how Filipino men tended to choose other

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countries, while an increasing number of Filipina women decided to settle in Italy), this consideration is drawn from the evaluations and information gathered during the interviews. A more careful analysis of these mechanisms and their strength in determining the direction and composition of migration flows would require comparative studies in different countries of immigration.

A last source that sheds light on immigration to Rome is a 1977 documentary dedicated to the city's Eritrean community, produced by the Centro Sperimentale di Cinematografia and entitled *A testimonianza di una condizione – 2000 eritrei a Roma*.[11] It offers an insight into the Eritrean community in Rome: how they go about their day-to-day lives, their problems and their political and social commitments. The documentary follows and interviews some Eritrean immigrants, who talk about their experience in Italy, their current living conditions, and their hopes for the future. It also documents the social and political activity of the Eritrean community, which holds regular meetings (under the banner of the Popular Liberation Front of Eritrea). The documentary discusses the members' situations and how to improve them but also displays traditional dances and songs. Furthermore, the community organises self-managed literacy and education courses for its members. The centrality of women is visible in the first outdoor scenes, filmed in a square near the main train station, where Eritrean women meet and talk. Interviews with a number of women – all employed as maids – are at the heart of the documentary. One interviewee says that work is available, especially for women, but that it is the kind of job 'that not only Italians have given up but also all the other foreigners'. A young Eritrean woman who arrived in 1973 for 'reasons of study' says she left two families that prevented her from reconciling study and work until she ended up in a family that allowed her to attend remedial courses in accountancy, in the hope of enrolling in the university. Considering that, at the beginning of the 1970s, around 20 per cent of foreigners in Italy had a residence permit for study purposes (Berhe 2023, 21–23), the documentary suggests the under-researched link between domestic work as a resource and the women's ambition to invest in education as a chance to improve their status.

Being able to leave a family that provides poor working conditions is a crucial step, as there is an important difference between domestic workers and other workers in terms of how they are hired and the possibilities of changing jobs. For the former, it is the provincial labour office that defines the number of possible foreigners to be employed, based on the offers received; for the latter, the possibility of employment is assessed on a case-by-case basis. All workers can change employers, but this is more difficult – even impossible, in the case of a break in employment – for domestic workers. For the latter, it is also not possible to change jobs completely. 'Among domestic helpers, it is the conditions laid down in the regulations that can push the worker into irregular employment: the impossibility of changing employer or finding another one' (ECAP-CGIL and EMIM 1980, 39).

Can domestic work be considered work?

There is no doubt that women, who have been at the forefront of immigration, entered the Italian labour market in the 1960s and 1970s, legally or illegally. Why, then, have they remained invisible, especially for scholars? Some read this lack of attention to immigrant women as the result of a dominant androcentric vision in the social sciences and of the fact that, at the time, Italy was not considered a country of immigration. However, it must also be related to the type of professional insertion of immigrants: from the beginning, in fact, research has reported a high percentage of women working in the domestic sector (Miranda 2018).

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Immigrant women are therefore visible, but both narratives and assessments on migration excessively simplify their presence, and despite the complex dynamics, it is generally looked at through dichotomies (i.e. public/private, visibility/invisibility, subalternity/rights). Jacqueline Andall (2000) has examined the ways in which Italian women, in this period, progressively 'transferred' domestic and care responsibilities to immigrant women in exchange for a more or less fair wage. This dynamic, which involved the crucial articulation of competencies considered inherently gendered, implies much more than a mere economic exchange, which often weighed on the 'wife's' income and not on the overall family budget. This exchange reaffirmed the idea that immigrants had to fulfil a biological destiny.

It is worth remembering that Article 37 of the Italian Constitution guarantees 'working women equal rights and, for the same work, equal wages as male workers' and specifies that 'working conditions' must allow women 'to fulfil their essential family function'. The adjective 'essential' suggests both a need and a destiny. It is a formulation that was the result of a compromise – at the Constituent Assembly (1946–7) – between Catholic forces and conservative, left-wing and secular parties, but it also reflects an ambivalence within the labour movement itself (Gissi 2018). When, on 8 March 1972, Roman feminists celebrated International Women's Day, taking to the streets for the first time and even clashing with the police, they circulated a leaflet with a particularly significant incipit: 'International Women's Day. The woman is still a slave! 90 or 40 hours a week of unpaid work at home and the woman is a housewife anyway.' This was a criticism of the rigid dichotomy according to which the productive dimension of work resides in the public sphere and the reproductive dimension in the private sphere. Social reproduction is not considered 'work'; it is seen solely as self-care and biological destiny. In the early 1970s, Mariarosa Dalla Costa opened up the debate on domestic work and its remuneration, on the family as a place of production and reproduction of the power of labour. Domestic work was considered a hidden phase of capitalist accumulation, the territory a great social factory, the home a centre of production and the housewife its worker.[12] In order to generate and reproduce itself, the power of labour – the most valuable commodity for capital – presupposed women's labour and the realisation of consumption through women's labour. The working-class housewife was the privileged subject of this political work. In 1972, Dalla Costa (Padua), Selma James (London), Silvia Federici (New York) and Brigitte Galtier (Paris) set up the Collettivo Internazionale Femminista to promote a debate on reproductive labour and to co-ordinate actions in various countries (Bracke 2014). Soon afterwards, a vast international network – Wages for Housework Groups and Committees – arose. In 1974, at the convention of the various Italian feminist groups held in Pinarella di Cervia, on the Adriatic coast, the group Lotta Femminista per il salario al lavoro domestico (Feminist Struggle for Wages for Housework) proposed the conquest of wages as its main objective; the discussion was repeated at the second convention in 1975.

The issue is clear: the productive dimension of work resides in the public sphere; the reproductive one in the private sphere. Starting from the assumption that, in the Fordist factory, the workplace is physically determined and based on precise relations of production and power, the feminists who espoused the cause of wages claimed that this model, elevated to a paradigm, could be 'exported' to a class struggle within the domestic sphere, in the field of social reproduction. Their claim determined the subversion and not the recomposition of the conflict (Federici 1975). Thanks also to the reflections of the feminist group Il cerchio spezzato (The Broken Circle), domestic work was brought back into the overall system of production and moved from a 'private' dimension to the social and economic terrain. Feminist writings inspired by Marxism attributed a dual aspect to male power within the family:

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> man has the power to exploit (in the family, he is the bourgeois, the woman the proletarian) and to command (the man is the master: he accumulates by appropriating the woman's surplus labour at home he does not work as master; the woman is the dispossessed, the proletarian). (FILF 1971, 11–14)

However, the approach of Lotta Femminista – although not always shared by the other feminist groups – had considerable subversive value. Part of the feminist movement thought that this approach would end up crystallising the division of labour along gender lines.[13] It identified many of the lines (e.g. class) that categorise housewives as a labour force, but it failed to frame the ways and 'names' of the progressive transfer of these tasks to immigrant women, affected by other lines of segmentation (e.g. colour). Even in the political practice of groups linked to the Feminist Struggle for Wages for Housework, those that were most influenced by intense relations with British and American black feminism, there has been little deconstruction of the ways, times and reasons why 'other' women have arrived in a country and come to inhabit homes to work there. This lack of alliance was also stressed in the public discourse as recounted in the article on the occasion of the ninth national meeting of Apicolf in 1976, which emphasised 'the complete absence of feminists … who also claimed a wage for housewives' (Mulassano 1976).

In sum, the political dimension of female immigration is difficult to trace in feminist production of the 1970s. The latter pays particular attention, albeit not consistently or widely, to internal, European or 'Third World' migrations, identifiable as an industrial reserve army or as a 'determinant' in the phase of the 'multinational restructuring' of some European countries that ends up 'catalysing and massifying processes of female autonomy already underway', as in the case of Italian female migrants to Germany after the Second World War (Dalla Costa 1974, 222; Dalla Costa 1988). On the other hand, even criticism of the intervention of international organisations in 'Third World' countries reflects the vision of migrant men and settled women (Colombo 1982). The issue is undoubtedly identified but within a victimising framework, in which agency is again little considered and the possibility of joint action with immigrant women only remote and vague. The issue deserves attention because it calls into question elements – foreignness to the public sphere and to the category of the political – that are no longer inherent in all women but only in some, domestic women – especially foreign women. This is the case even when the domestic sphere represents a piece of a complicated migratory project and implies paid work relationships in which economic and non-economic aspects are intertwined (Miranda 2004). The home, which in feminist theoretical elaboration and practice has explicitly become a political contest, reaffirms itself as 'private' when it concerns the life and work of foreign maids.

Conclusion

In her monograph on domestic service in Britain, Lucy Delap (2011, 1) stated that this sector is extraordinarily prominent, as a socio-cultural and policy problem, as a widely experienced institution, and as a symbolic resource for social criticism and nostalgia. It formed a uniquely significant site in which individuals of different classes, generations and migrant origin encountered each other and negotiated their social boundaries and identities.

The main aspects that link domestic work and female migration raise crucial issues such as the policies that regulate immigration, welfare models, the redefinition of the concepts of 'natural' and 'traditional', the relations between class and gender, the dynamics of defining 'otherness' and the positioning of public and private (Colombo 2003). Owing to

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the urgency of these themes, historiography has also studied the link between domestic work and female migration from a long-term perspective (Sarti 2008, 2010a, 2014, 2016). However, the turning point in the period under consideration here, when domestic work in Italy became one of the main forms of employment for immigrant women to the extent that their presence became dominant in the sector, remains little investigated. In European history, domestic work has often represented a bridging occupation connected to forms of geographical and/or social (not necessarily upward) mobility.

Servants and maids were often migrants, travelling greater or lesser distances, or strangers to the context in which they worked. The high proportion of foreigners among today's domestic and care workers is not unprecedented. A lower status of 'citizenship' among domestic staff is a defining characteristic of the sector. During the 1970s, as Italian women gained more rights, domestic work and care work were increasingly left to people who, as foreigners, had relatively few rights. However, this does not mean that the arrival of foreign women was automatically linked to Italian women's entry into the world of non-domestic work, or that migration flows depended on the emancipation of native women. In fact, female immigration in Italy rather questions the so-called 'crisis of patriarchy'. The analysis of female immigration is in line with the question raised by Adelina Miranda and Amalia Signorelli (2011, 38): namely, whether 'women are not dragged into a process that attributes new functions and different meanings to already known forms of domination and submission'. However, domestic work and care work seem to have a dual nature; given their negative aspects, they are usually performed by workers who are in a weak position in the labour market. Yet, they offer important advantages to migrants, providing income, food, accommodation and sometimes a chance to exploit the relationship network of the employer's family. The personal connections of those who decide to emigrate often determine their destination and, even more often, constitute crucial capital for the gradual inclusion in a labour market that, for newcomers, is inevitably 'completely impenetrable at the beginning' (Ramella 2003, 353). Those same relationships can become a way to enter a country legally or to legalise one's position there. To quote Delap again, 'migrant workers have undertaken domestic employment as a means of obtaining visas or facilitating the shift into a new labour market' (2011, 80; see also Granovetter 1995). From this point of view, the experience of taking up a service role is not only a form of exploitation or uprooting. It can also be an opportunity to leave behind poverty or a restricted and oppressive world, with the aim of gaining freedom and dignity, even if one's path is marked by material and symbolic subordination.

However, when in the 1980s more general inquiries and surveys on immigration began to appear, 'foreign' migrants were only rarely the focus of specific studies, while their presence in intimate home spaces and even in newspapers of different political orientations has since become a daily occurrence. The political debate on immigration, which was always the result of extraordinary and unplanned measures, was superficial, insufficient and inattentive to specificities. It was only between the 1980s and the 1990s that the immigrants' crucial presence was finally intercepted by anthropologists and sociologists who grasped the peculiarities of that presence. Yet, the previous 15-year period, during which these migrants had already been present in the peninsula, has scarcely been investigated; as a result, these women have remained almost invisible to the eyes of historians. Luca Einaudi (2007, 86), for example, has argued that migrant women were not 'a conspicuous social phenomenon because they did not gather in the streets like men'.[14] Although this stereotypical image damaged migrants in general, 'the migrant woman' in particular became an ideal type, envisioned as a representative exponent of a particularly homogeneous category even in a period such as the one being considered here (Morokvasic cited in Sorgoni 2000, 79; see also Morokvasic 1984), when the presence of immigrants was already widespread, visible and extremely complex (Catanzaro and

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Colombo 2009). Migrant women were educated, schooled or semi-illiterate, coming from urban or deeply rural contexts. Migration flows originated from South America, Yugoslavia and the Philippines – or from Greece, Spain and Portugal, as a result of the dictatorial regimes in these three countries until the mid-1970s – but the common perception of immigration is that it mainly originates from Africa (Curcio 2012, 156). In his study of foreign domestic workers, one of the few on the subject in the 1970s, Father Erminio Crippa wrote that 'women from the Third World, moreover, come directly from a civilisation that is still rural, where relations are of a primary nature', making a broad generalisation (Salvini 1980, 405). This generalisation was enhanced by the fact that these women were almost entirely employed in a peculiar sector: domestic work. At the same time, the term 'immigrant' was eventually used to indicate less an extensive (or relatively extensive) experience of mobility – the possible bureaucratic crossing of a border or the subjectivity determined by the implementation of a migration project – than an authentic and homogeneous 'cultural distance'.[15]

With respect to the 'foreign' maids who settled in Italian homes, the symbolic place of intimacy during the years examined here, this 'otherness' determined an extremely complex dialectic that oscillated between two mutually supporting extremes: on the one hand, the reassuring black maid seen in the advertisements for a well-known brand of olive oil, speaking with a perfect Venetian accent and dressed in 'Mammy' attire, thus conforming to the traditional model of the servant (Perilli 2020, 101–131); on the other, the stranger. The failure of both policymakers and scholars to analyse the initial phase, the complex composition of the first migration flows, the migratory dynamics that started the networks and the initial working conditions has progressively determined the structuring of a rationalised image,[16] which was then simplified, made homogeneous and, eventually, lasting. A tendency to exoticise and 'orientalise' perspectives towards migrants persists in the absence of a greater understanding of the phenomenon of migration, perpetuating an undesirable sense of 'otherness'. Instead of diminishing in public discourse, this perspective solidifies through images of questionable and enduring subalternity, particularly evident in the portrayal of domestic work.

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Notes

1. Deaglio adds: '[Italy] really only thrived because it had promoted the great migration from the South to the North, from the countryside to the factories: young people with somewhat darker skin, black fur and strange costumes. The idea was that they would work and thank [us] without making too many requests. We were quite racist even then. It was the immigrants who led the great change and made us appreciate the pleasures of democracy. Ah, if the pattern could be repeated today!'
2. API/COLF, whose *raison d'être* is to provide welfare and training, was founded in 1971 on the initiative of the Italian Bishops' Conference, which approved its statute. It also takes care of immigrant domestic workers, organises educational and professional courses and residential training or summer courses, produces its own publications, proposes legislative initiatives, takes care of cultural activities and social and religious training, and provides legal assistance and recreational activities. In particular, it aims to create leaders capable of guiding their co-workers and, once their stay in Italy comes to an end, training fellow citizens who intend to find a job as domestic workers in Italy or in their homeland (API/COLF n.d.).
3. API/COLF – *memoria* (duplicate), cited in Salvini (1980, 401). The same estimate is given by Rampini (1980, 16). For the Milan area, see the statistical data of the Centro Missionario Diocesano (Ufficio colf estere), which for the early 1980s gives an estimate of 5,450 number of workers.
4. 'Tavola 10: La consistenza della popolazione straniera secondo diverse fonti ufficiali', cited in Natale (1983, 285).

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5. On this topic, see Arena (1983), Taravella (1984), Campani (1989), Andall (1992, 2005), Marchetti (2014), Marchetti and Sgueglia (2008) and Morone (2015).
6. See Capalbo (1982), Anselmi (1987), Scalzo (1984), Bronzo et al. (1984) and Vinco (1982).
7. On the dynamics of racialisation in the mediating agencies, see Bakan and Stasiulis (1995).
8. Annamaria Gallone, *Mariscica fu la prima*, 90 minutes, Kenzi Productions, Italy/CapeVerde, 2011.
9. Ministero del Lavoro e della Previdenza Sociale, circular no. 100/6/V, 27 June 1966; circular no. 37/106/III, 30 December 1972, 'Nuova procedura per la concessione della autorizzazione al lavoro in favore dei lavoratori stranieri addetti ai servizi domestici'.
10. See the research published in 1988 by the Municipality of Rome in a volume entitled *Roma: Immigrazione dai paesi del terzo mondo* (1988). The well-known sociologist Franco Ferrarotti defined it as 'perhaps the first specifically sociological research on coloured migrants in Rome' (1988, 8). See also Caritas Diocesana di Roma (1984).
11. Federico Bruno, Giovanni Gervasi, Ali Reza Movahed, Paolo Rossato and Johannes Yemane, *A testimonianza di una condizione – 2000 eritrei a Roma*, 21 minutes, black and white, in Archivio Audiovisivo del Movimento operaio e democratico.
12. Biographical note and introduction to the Inventory Archive of the Feminist Struggle for Wages for Housework, donation by Mariarosa Dalla Costa, available at https://www.bibliotechecivichepadova.it/it/collezioni-biblioteca/dalla-costa.
13. However, the genealogy of the 'wages for housework' debate is complex as it was first theorised in the 1930s, when fascism ambiguously shifted domesticity from the exclusively private sphere to the realm of the state (Gissi 2018).
14. On the delay, also in Italy, see Picciolini (1992) and Lodigiani (1994).
15. According to Yasemin Soysal (1996), the term 'immigrant' mostly refers to the people of 'distant' lands and cultures 'not like ours'.
16. According to Jacqueline Andall (2000, 2), 'the characteristics of this female migration were noteworthy for several reasons. Firstly, female migrants to Italy in the 1970s were autonomous primary migrants. Furthermore, their migration was essentially a single-sex migration. This was not simply a new phenomenon for Italy but additionally marked a new phase in the nature of post-war migration to Europe.'

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Italian summary

Recentemente, ricerche decisive sull'immigrazione straniera in Italia, incentrate sui primissimi flussi migratori del secondo dopoguerra, hanno offerto una periodizzazione più appropriata del fenomeno. Le donne hanno preso parte a questi flussi iniziali, determinati in una prima fase dai nuovi assetti delle ex colonie italiane (Eritrea, Somalia ed Etiopia). Successivamente, le immigrate sono arrivate

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da vari altri Paesi (Spagna, Capo Verde, Portogallo, El Salvador, Perù, Filippine, Sri Lanka, Ceylon, India, Bangladesh, Pakistan). Allo stesso tempo, la maggior parte era impiegata in un settore specifico del mercato del lavoro: il lavoro domestico. Questo articolo si concentra sulle donne immigrate impiegate come lavoratrici domestiche, sulle relative politiche e sulla loro presenza nel discorso pubblico in Italia negli anni Sessanta e Settanta. Attingendo a dati statistici e inchieste, a materiali giornalistici e audiovisivi, nonché alle teorie e alle pratiche femministe, si propone di analizzare la costruzione di paradigmi – visibilità, invisibilità, subalternità, diritti e razzializzazione – associati all'immigrazione femminile e al lavoro domestico come settore specifico di occupazione.

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