"Oh, You Speak Italian Very Well": Narratives of African Muslim Women with a Migrant Background in Italy

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Abstract. Migrants are, in the collective imagination of the Western citizen, made up of desperate women and men fleeing from catastrophic events, attempting to invade the borders of an opulent Europe while crossing the Mediterranean Sea clandestinely. Coupling with that there is the notion that the majority of immigrants to Europe are practicing the Islamic faith, whose principles are perceived as incompatible with the Western values. As result young individuals with an immigrant background, commonly defined as 'second-generation immigrants' are often subject to prejudices and to a negative attitude from nationals. Through the narratives of young Muslim women with an African and migrant background, the paper aims at offering a snapshot on how this category, is perceived in Italy. The paper initially provides some theoretical background on the way social representation of cultural diversity is determined; the empirical analysis offers the women's perspective on how cultural diversity is represented. The goal is to provide a better understanding of the image of the Muslim women linked to their social, economic and cultural roots, and how the mutual exchange of cultural capital can consolidate the opportunities for cooperation to achieve an inclusive and intercultural society.

Keywords: *discrimination, Italy, Muslim, migrant background, women*

1. Introduction

The joint OECD/EU study on immigrants' integration (OECD, 2018) indicates that approximately 58 million foreign-born residents, representing 11.5% of its population, live in the European Union (EU). Germany and France, hosting respectively 22% and 14% foreign-born citizens, are the main immigrant host countries, followed by Italy and Spain, each accommodating 10% foreign-born citizens. The latest European Union Minorities and Discrimination Survey provides relevant information on effective and perceived hate-motivated persecution. The survey indicates that a considerable proportion of respondents experienced high levels of discrimination because of their ethnic or immigrant background, and /or because of skin colour and religion. In particular it shows that "*four out of 10*

*respondents (38 %) felt discriminated against in the five years before the survey …
and one in four (24 %) experienced this in the 12 months preceding the survey*", (EU-
MIDIS II, 2017, p. 13). These findings suggest that discrimination in the EU continues
to affect large numbers of immigrants and their children as well. Considering the
relevance that second generation immigrants have in Italy, it is important to look
more in details on the way effective and perceived discrimination impacts on them
and on their path to achieve inclusion in the country.

The increase in the number of adolescents with a migrant background has
spawned, in recent years, a wide debate in Europe and in Italy in particular, (EU,
2020; Caneva, 2014) on such category and on the policies to favour their inclusion.
The outcomes of this 'second-generation immigrants', is considered a good proxy of
the level of inclusion in any given country, but effective and perceived discrimination,
can hamper such process and impede social cohesion. Several studies (Ziersch, Due,
Walsh, 2020; Farahat, 2021) have suggested that discrimination, particularly in the
case of immigrants' children born or arrived in a host country at a young age,
negatively affects the assimilation/inclusion process, lessening the sense of
belonging in the host country.

The assimilation's process originally described with reference to the North
American migration flows, implies that the migrants and/or their children by
adopting the language, values and norms of the host society, can become similar to
the native. In the absence of prejudice and discrimination such process has been
presented as a natural outcome for the migrants. The term is however ambiguous
since, to succeed, assimilation implies that the migrants abandon their cultural
identity (Houtkamp 2015). Furthermore, the assimilation's process becomes
problematic when referred to both migrants and their offspring who can be
considered as transnational migrants, virtually mobile (Urry 2020) maintaining social
relations with relatives and friends in the country of origin, (Bash et al., 2008).
Concurrently, particularly in the case of the migrants' offspring, born or arrived at an
early age in the host country and schooled there, the idea of national boundaries
loses its relevance. For this reason, it is more appropriately the term inclusion,
described as a reciprocal, two-way, process where the migrants are not asked to
adapt to the host society, but they are helped and encouraged to participate in their
new community, (Macleod, 2021). At the foundation of the inclusion concept, there
is the assumption that both parties want to create a common collective identity
based on shared values and the sense of belonging to a collective community

(Medda-Windischer, 2013). However, especially in Italy, the acquisition of citizenship has produced an ample debate among those who see citizenship as a factor that favors the processes of inclusion and those who consider it a sort of reward, to be deserved, (Attanasio, 2021). The final proof of the integration itself, according to a logic which can be a cause of exclusion in the provision of rights and services, particularly in the case of children with a migrant background.

In this context, the debate on the identity and the sense of belonging of the individuals with a migrant background is equally broad and lively and involves scholars of different social fields. Terms such as suspended identities, multiple belongings, hybridization of identity (Lannutti, 2014; Valtolina and Marrazzi, 2006) have been used, to this regard reopening the discussion at national and international level on the issue of citizenship, (Bauman 2011).

Before going further into the analysis, we deem appropriate to spend a few words on the definition of second-generation immigrants. For statistical purposes, the Conference of European Statisticians (UNECE 2010, p. 84) refers to them as "*the group of persons born in the country whose parents were born abroad*"; to this group, the children of foreign parents born abroad, but arrived in the country within the pre-adolescent period, are added. We are of the opinion that this definition neither fully represents who the native born with immigrant parents are, nor properly reflects the experience of these citizens in the host country. On the contrary, it risks to perpetuate the imagine of them as immigrants. The native-born offspring of immigrants, as well as those who arrived at a very young age and/or when they were still of mandatory schooling age, have in fact been raised and educated in an environment which is the same of their peers in the host country. Although some elements of their foreign origin remain part of their individuality, these cannot and should not affect their identification as the native-born population. For this reason, we are going to follow the OECD (2018) classification which uses for this group the definition of people/children with a migrant background.

The study focuses on the subcategory of African Muslim women since by wearing the veil, they are more easily identified as dissimilar and hence are more easily subject to multi-facial forms of discrimination (ethnical, skin, gender, and religious). while epitomising the idea of an oppressive Islamic culture described as incompatible with the Italian Christian roots, (Salih, 2010). On the other hand, as several studies indicate, young Muslim women are starting to challenge those negative representation of themselves and Islam, showing a much stronger agency

than men (Evolvi, 2017; Manisera, 2021).

The paper is organised as follows: after the introduction, section 2 provides some background on the debate on migration in Italy, looking specifically at the presence of Muslims in the country and at the level of discrimination towards immigrants. Section 3, describes the methodology used to carry out the empirical study, while section 4 presents the finding and section 5 discusses and analyses the narratives of Muslim women interviewed. Although citizenship is not the main focus of our empirical exercise, this issue has also emerged as one of the most significant factors which can facilitate or impede inclusion. The conclusions complete the paper.

2. Migrants' perceptions and Muslim presence in Italy

Migrants have often been perceived according to a Eurocentric vision based on stereotypes and / or a flawed representation of them (Hinojo, 2016). The African continent after sixty years of political independence is still viewed negatively (Bates, 2012; Soto 2020), shaken up by climatic and health emergencies, conflicts or wars, with scarce resources and absolute poverty, (Cohen, 2014; Poncian, 2015). African migrants are generally described as a peril to security and often epitomised as a threat to European culture and values, (Rasinger, 2010).

The persistence of such perceptions has generally been blamed on mediatised incidents which, "...*focusing on the threats that immigrants and refugees pose to members of host societ*ies.", (Esses et al. 2013, p. 520), describe migration as a problem. As results migrants have often been portrayed in the public discussion and by politicians, as a menace to security and, in the long-term, a direct threat to European national identity and culture, (Huysmans, 2006; Horsti, 2008; Caruso, Venditto, 2020). Women and youth migrants are on the other hand generally labelled as either victims of abuses or as taking advantage of EU's welfare system, (Anderson, 2012; Hennebry et al., 2017). Such representations influence the current public debate on migration and can explain the high level of discrimination experienced in Europe, and in Italy in particular, by immigrants and native-born children of immigrants.

More specifically the EU-MIDIS II (2017) survey, likewise a similar survey carried out in 2008, indicates that respondents with North African (NOAFR) and Sub-Saharan African (SSAFR) background, the subjects of our empirical analysis, continue to experience the highest levels of discrimination. In Italy the data shows an average

rate of discrimination for the two groups, even higher than the EU's average, as indicated in tables 1a and 1b.

***Table 1a.* Overall discrimination* in the 12 months before the survey**

12 Months Before					
Italy -Average	28%	*Women*	*Men*	EU28 -Average	24%
SSAFR	23%	29%	19%		10%
NOAFR	34%	*37%*	*31%*		31%

Source: EU-MIDIS II (2019) *based on ethnic or immigrant background (incl. skin colour, ethnic origin, religion and or religious belief)

***Table 1b.* Overall discrimination* in the 5 years before the survey**

5 Years Before					
Italy -Average	48%	Women	Men	EU28 -Average	38%
SSAFR	48%	42%	54%		39%
NOAFR	51%	46%	54%		45%

Source: EU-MIDIS II (2019) *based on ethnic or immigrant background (incl. skin colour, ethnic origin, religion and or religious belief)

The survey builds on previous studies on prejudice towards foreigners in Italy (Rampelli, Spagnolo, D'Alessandro 2011), denoting that discrimination is a structural, rather than a transient phenomenon. Table 2 shows that ethnic origin, skin colour and religion are the most relevant ways in which discrimination manifests itself.

Table 2.* Prevalence of discrimination based on ethnic origin, skin colour and religion in the 5 years before the survey in 4 areas of life

Ethnic Origin					
Italy -Average	37%	*Women*	*Men*	EU28 -Average	25%
SSAFR	34%	28%	37%		19%
NOAFR	40%	37%	41%		36%
Skin Colour					
Italy -Average	22%	*Women*	*Men*	EU28 -Average	12%
SSAFR	37%	*26%*	*43%*		27%
NOAFR	20%	*17%*	*21%*		9%
Religion					
Italy -Average	19%			EU28 -Average	12%
SSAFR	10%				5%
NOAFR	29%				20%

Source: EU-MIDIS II (2019) * 1: Looking for work, 2: At work, 3: Housing, 4: In contact with school authorities as a parent or guardian.

2.1. Muslim community in Italy

The absence of an ad hoc database makes it difficult to provide an exact value for faithful of any religion in Italy. In the Italian popular imaginary, Muslims have become a synonym for foreigners and immigrants in general, (della Porta, Bosi, 2010). ISMU Foundation provides the most recent estimates on the number of subjects who refer to the moral and social values of Islam. As of 1 January 2020, Muslims in Italy represent about 1 million and 574 thousand people (29.2% of the total foreign residents), excluding those who have acquired Italian citizenship and those not registered; minors of any age, including infants, are included, in the estimates, (ISMU 2020). Taking into account the naturalization of many Muslims, and hence including both Italian citizens and those resident with foreign citizenship, in 2020 there were 2.7 million Muslims, in Italy equal to 4.9% of the total population in the country, (Openpolis, 2021). They originate from many different countries, but predominantly from the African continent, (Spena, 2010). More specifically, it is estimated that almost 3 out of 10 (28.9%) Muslims are Europeans, almost all coming from the Balkan and central-eastern area (Albanians, Moldavians and Kosovars). Over half of foreign Muslims residing in Italy (52.7%), are Africans, mainly from the Maghreb and the Mashrek (37.8%), led by Moroccan citizens, followed by Egyptians and Tunisians. Senegalese and Nigerians represent the majority of Muslims from the Western Africa (13.6%). Just under one fifth (18.5%) of foreign Muslims residing in Italy are Asian, mainly from the Indian sub-continent (Bangladeshis and Pakistanis). Although a minority, Muslims are a well-structured presence in the country, particularly in the northern regions and in the capital Rome, where more than 100,000 Muslims reside, the same number of Muslims living in Milan, (Ciocca, 2019). The vast majority of Muslim immigrants belong to the age cohort 16-40 and almost one third are women.

3. Methodology

The paper uses Charmaz's (2014), constructivist version of grounded theory which the authors believe to be appropriate to address the dichotomy between the perception and the reality of discrimination of Muslim women in Italy. Emphasis has been put on the respondents' narrative and the process resulting from the interaction with the actors via the medium of interviews. The participants' narratives are, in fact, not just 'stories', but are filled with social life information which can be

brought to light through the interpretative role of the researcher, (Erol Isik, 2015). The adoption of a constructivist approach to grounded theory is ontologically related to the authors' conviction that the reality of the phenomenon observed, cannot be understood without reference to the values and reasons that the actors attach to their actions and to that of those surrounding them. Using a constructivist grounded theory approach has allowed to go beyond the preconceived representation of Muslim women in Italy, which has been rather explained from the actors' experiences. The respondents were asked to illustrate their insight on five areas:

1- The role women had in the respondents/parents' country of origin and in Italy;

2- The representation of women Muslim/immigrants and Islam in Italy;

3- How being a Muslim impacted on the respondents' life;

4- The respondent identification with the migrant's category;

5- The way forward to change the existing narrative on women Muslim and Islam.

The women's narratives pertaining the 5 areas have been analytically broken down and coded, using catch verbs and words that have captured, in a wider form, the participants' tacit meanings recorded in the data. From the initial codes more selective focused codes have been identified. In line with the ontological and epistemological principles of constructivism, the constant analytical comparison with the existing data has helped to synthesize conceptual categories identified by the interaction of the researchers with the data and their interpretation. Theoretical coding has allowed the conceptualisation of the possible relationships existing between the different categories identified through focused coding, helping to explain the phenomenon analysed as indicated in table 4 below.

Data saturation (no more new information emerging from the sample) has been used to determine the size sample; in this case it was reached with 10 respondents. 5 participants were identified based on their engagement and role they had in both public institutions and civil society organisations; the remaining 5 were randomly identified from an initial contact of the authors. COVID-19 mobility and safety restrictions, made it difficult to have 'traditional' face-to-face interviews, hence interviews were conducted using alternative social media tools, such as Google-meet, Skype and WhatsApp. The data were collected from May to September 2021, apart from some hiccups, due to unstable connection, the interviews were conducted in a smooth way and lasted between 1 to 3 hours. The

semi structured questionnaire had two components: the first component with closed questions provided a general description of the respondents, the second component, with open-ended questions, allowed the participants to reflect on the questions posed and to describe their experiences and views. All interviews were recorded.

Prior to data collection, the researchers provided a self-introduction to the participants and explained the study's objectives and methodology. Informed consent was obtained from all participants, extra permission was requested in order to make use of the voice recordings; none of the participants refused to consent. The participants were told that confidentiality and anonymity would have been maintained during the study and informed that they had the freedom to withdraw from the study at any time without consequences. Although the sample size may appear small and fell short of the suggested guideline for actual sample sizes in qualitative analysis, (Creswell, 1998).

Tables 3a and 3b provide information on the respondents' general characteristics; they were mostly young women born in Italy with one or both parents born in a foreign country, and young foreign-born women, schooled in Italy, arrived in the country with their immigrant parents before the age of 10. The median age of the respondents was 29 years, the majority of them hold a tertiary degree. The spatial representation of the sample covered the North, the Centre and the South of the country. 60% of the respondents had a Moroccan family background followed by respondents with an Egyptian, Senegalese and Palestine background. This is in line with the fact that over half (52.7%) of the Muslim living in Italy are Africans, with Moroccans in the lead, followed at a distance by Egyptians and Senegalese, (Openpolis, 2021). All, but one respondent, were of African origin, the one who was not, was married with an African citizen and had direct knowledge of the condition of women in the African continent

The majority of the respondent, 60%, had already acquired Italian citizenship, while 20% of them were waiting for the outcome of the citizenship's request; only 1 respondent did not apply for it.

All participants interviewed self-identified as Muslim, however, there were variation and differentiation in terms of level and degree of religious practice.

Table 3a. Respondents Descriptive Characteristic

	Age	Parents' country of origin	Education	Region of residence	Marital Status	Professional tittle/role
1	30-40	Morocco	MA	Veneto North West	Married children	Lawyer
2	20-30	Morocco	Dipl. in design	Piemonte North West	Married children	Fashion Designer
3	18-20	Senegal	Student	Lombardia North West	Single no children	Student, Influencer
4	20-30	Egypt	Uni Student	Lombardia North West	Single no children	Student, Influencer
5	20-30	Morocco	MA	Emilia Romagna Central North	Single no children	Pupillage Lawyer
6	20-30	Morocco	Degree	Piemonte North West	Single no children	MA Student
7	40-50	Palestine Italy	Dipl.	Lombardia North West	Married children	CEO NGO
8	30-40	Egypt	Degree	Emilia Romagna Central North	Single children	Social Assistant
9	30-40	Morocco	Degree	Sicily South	Single no children	Lawyer
10	30-40	Morocco	MA	Lazio Centre	Single no children	Social Assistant

Source: Own elaboration

Table 3b. Respondents Descriptive Characteristics

	Migration History	Schooling	Religion	Nationality	Italian citizenship
1	Arrived age 7	From Primary to Tertiary	Not practicing	Moroccan	Not requested
2	Arrived age 3	From Primary to Tertiary	Practicing	Moroccan	denied, reapplied
3	Arrived age 4	From Primary to Tertiary, but 3 years in Senegal	Practicing	Senegalese	denied
4	Arrived age 3 months	From Primary to Tertiary	Practicing	Egyptian	requested, pending
5	Born in Italy	From Primary to Tertiary	Practicing	Moroccan	by naturalisation
6	Arrived age 1 and half years	From Primary to Tertiary	Practicing	Moroccan	acquired before 18 years old
7	Born in Italy	From Primary to Secondary	Practicing	Italian	

8	Arrived age 4	From Primary to Tertiary	Practicing	Egyptian	acquired when 18 years old
9	Arrived age 10 months	From Primary to Tertiary	Practicing	Moroccan	acquired when 18 years old
10	Born in Italy	From Primary to Tertiary	Practicing	Moroccan	acquired when 18 years old

Source: Own elaboration

The questionnaire was designed in such a way to protect the dignity and welfare of the participants, so that participants did not feel humiliated, embarrassed, scared, anxious, stressed, saddened, or discouraged. The data was transcribed by the researchers within 24 hours of the interviews and the codes were independently extracted and classified leading to the identification of themes and categories. The researchers systematically discussed the findings to verify the appropriateness of the conceptual meanings and terminology to use. By using self-reflection, we were able to identify, articulate, examine and critique our believes which could have influenced the research and reduce the bias and partisanship, (Rowe, 2014; Holmes, 2020).

4. Findings

This section presents the outcomes of the interviews leading to agency representation of the African Muslim women with a migrant background. The reflexive analysis of the respondents' narratives led to the identification of focused codes which produced 5 general categories as shown in table 4 below.

Namely: 1- Family values and patriarchism; 2- Fear of the other, fear of the Muslim and discrimination; 3- Religion as a form of identity; 4- Assimilation with a dual identity; 5- Being a bridge between different cultures. Those categories provided an explanatory framework to describe the social process of the interaction between the personal views of the respondents and the influence that the external structures had on the construction of such views, (Giddens, 1984, 1991).

The subsections below offer a description of the respondents' answers leading to the identification of the 5 categories/conceptual themes.

Table 4. **Focused codes and categories**

Main issues investigated	Focused Codes	Categories-Conceptual Themes
Differences in the role women have in the (respondent/parents) country of origin and in Italy	Respect Commodification of women Women as objects Formal vs Effective equality Same opportunities Family values	1- Family values and Patriarchism
Representation of women Muslim/immigrants and Islam in Italy	Invisibility Oppressed/Submissive Closure Enemy Terrorist Stereotype	2 - Fear of the other, fear of the Muslim and Discrimination
The respondents feeling on Islamophobia	Lack of respect Prejudice Ignorance/lack of knowledge	
How external perceptions have affected the respondents	Challenge Belittled Learned to be strong To be ashamed Justify Burden	
How being a Muslim has impacted on the respondents' life	Burden Challenge Made me stronger To be responsible Self-confident Be proud	3- Religion as a form of identity
The respondents' relationship with the veil/hijab	Beauty Natural thing to do Spiritual guide To feel complete Burden Islamophobia Seen as a foreigner	
The respondent identification with the migrant's category	Society looks at me as an immigrant Veil and skin's colour elements of diversity Immigrant wrong definition Being delegitimised Citizenship as a tool for inclusion Mix culture	4 - Assimilation with a dual identity
The way forward to change the existing narrative	Inclusion Dialogue Engage with media / Inform Irony	5 - Being a bridge between different cultures

Source: Own elaboration

4.1. Family values and patriarchism

Describing the role women retain in their parents' country of origin and in Italy, the conceptual theme family values and patriarchism emerges.

Respondent 2 states that: "*In Morocco women are seen as mothers, sisters, daughters, and they are respected for that, you will never see a woman in TV or other media half naked or in an inopportune position, while this is common on Italian media, where women are seen as objects to achieve other objectives…*". Respondent 4 corroborates such narrative indicating that currently in Egypt women still play a traditional role both in the house and in the family. Similarly, respondent 3, indicates that in Senegal women play a critical role in "*raising the children and caring for the husband*". Interestingly both respondents do not immediately associate this position to the existence of patriarchal elements in the society, which however they acknowledge to exist. The existence of a family support mechanism, is also described as a useful tool to ensure women emancipation since it allows the women to go back to work after giving birth. In this description one can recognise the similar mechanism used in Italy in the past reappeared in the recent years due to the worsening of economic conditions and the absence of a comprehensive public welfare system for the families, (Da Roit, Sabatinelli, 2005).

Reflecting on the role played by the women in the family contest, the respondents stress their economic dependence which it is not accepted by respondent 3 who indicates, that she sees "[herself] *as an independent woman, capable of doing everything by* [herself]". Such view is further developed by respondent 9: "*If we compare the oriental/North African culture with the Italian culture, we can say that the women's role in Italy is more advanced than in Morocco. Women are often considered inferior to the men, and there is not the same gender equality that one would expect these days*".

When asked to reflexively assess the role of patriarchy in the African context all respondents acknowledge its presence; respondent 5 goes to the root-cause of the phenomena, explaining that it is the men who relegate women to "*traditional roles*" of taking care of the family, "*There is a patriarchal concept of the women's role, particularly in the rural area where access to education for the women is still limited*". What emerges from the respondents' narratives is the acknowledgment of dissimilarities in the women's role in the country of origin of their parents and Italy, however, patriarchism is identified as the underlining explanatory factor, which exist

in both environments, although it manifests itself in a more subtlety way in Italy, (Passarella, 2020).

4.2 Fear of the other, fear of the Muslim and discrimination

The explanatory categories, fear of the other/Muslim and discrimination, emerge from the respondents' reflective elaboration of the way Muslim/immigrant women and Islam are represented in Italy. Those categories are also directly correlated to the respondents' perception of Islamophobia, a phenomenon deeply rooted in the Italian society, (Alietti and Padovan, 2013, Lipori, 2020). As explained by respondent 4 "*Women immigrants are described as locked in the house by their husbands/partners, incapable of speaking Italian, and if employed they are engaged in humble activities, because no one expects immigrant working as professionals or having positions of high responsibility*". Respondent 5 echoes such sentiments specifying that Muslim women are. "*… seen as oppressed and this generate a sentiment of pity by non-Muslim who feel the need to free them from this oppression*", while respondent 2 adds to such narrative that Muslim women are invisible and, "*one seldom sees women represented in their day-to-day life*".

What also emerges from the comparative analysis of the respondents' reflection on the theme, is that this negative representation, mirrors the way Muslim males are described *"men are represented as violent, oppressive and authoritarian, the women are seen as subject to their violence, submissive, incapable of having their voice heard*", (respondent 9)." Traditional media have a big responsibility in promoting such an imagine, amplifying negative events involving Muslim (Conte 2009). As narrated by respondent 6, "*It is sufficient that one Jamil* [common Muslim man name] *is responsible of an act of gender violence, that all Muslims are responsible of violence against women, even if the same acts are committed by all men, regardless from their nationalities or religious believe*".

This type of narrative is reiterated by all the other women interviewed. In their observations they note that it seems to be a particular interest to represent an unhealthy image of Muslim people. "*Muslim women are often represented in the media by wearing the burqa, while this is a vest used only in few countries, Afghanistan, Somalia, Saudi Arabia*" (respondent 1). "*I am often interviewed on TV, but the journalists interview me only when there is a negative story concerning Muslim women. I was never asked to present the good things that with our organisation we do. They even told me that crime stories are what bring the audience*

up", (respondent 7). The respondents associate this negative perception also with Islamophobia, wearing the veil/hijab worsens the discriminations suffered by the women interviewed. More than anything else, it is the hijab which allows to be recognized as a Muslim believer and be categorised as different. "*The first day of school* [secondary, G9,] *wearing the hijab everyone* [friends and professors that knew her since G8] *looked at me differently, and were keeping asking me if the nijab has been forced on me. No one could believe or accept it was my decision*" (respondent 4).

Respondent 2 introduces the element of racialization and intersectional discrimination in this storyline, "*There is a sort of hierarchy when dealing with discrimination. White immigrants not wearing veils are treated better than the other, followed by black immigrants not wearing the veil, white immigrants with the veil and lastly black female immigrant wearing a veil. In general, black immigrants are more discriminated*". This description is echoed both by respondent 3, who stresses the fact that the negative representation of Muslim women is accentuated in the case of black people: "*Being woman, Muslim and black is not easy in Italy*", and respondent 4 who presents the additional component of black women's fetishization, "*My black friends tell me that from the age of 9/10 years they have been object of fetishization from white adults*".

Asked to reflectively assess the effects of such representation as agents and as members of the broad Muslim category, the respondents indicated that they felt a sense of moral responsibility towards themselves and the Muslim community at large. As put by respondent 2: "*I cannot act freely, I cannot make a slight mistake, because the mistakes I make are going to classify the whole Muslim community*". At the same time, they were aware that the burden to normalise the imagine Muslims have in the society is mostly left to them. Accepting this unfamiliar setting and creating original solutions to the difficulties associated with it (Arruda, 2015), is in the respondents' view, the way to overcome such difficulties. "*Having Muslim women influencers born in Italy, wearing the veil on Tik Tok or Instagram is an important sign. In the right direction.*" notes respondent 4, echoed by respondent 5, "*Only 5-6 years ago it was unimaginable to see an Italian Muslim woman, or a black Italian being an influencer on social media, now there are many of them, they give a more real and correct representation of who we are*".

4.3. Religion as a form of identity

Social identity theory (Greenfield and Marks, 2007) suggests that religious identification accounts for higher levels of psychological well-being, while affiliation to a group helps to define the personal social identity, (Burke, 2008). Those concepts clearly emerge from the respondents' narratives. Being a religious person is something normal, to be proud of, as indicated by respondent 2: "*Being Muslim it is something natural to me, I am happy of the pattern I have chosen to follow, I am proud of what I am because I know what Islam offers to women, and I know what women suffer on a daily life in a male dominated society*". At the *same* time the veil is seen by the majority of the respondents as an expression of freedom contrary to the dominant view it is a form of coercion, (Lazreg, 2009; Scamardella, 2012). In other cases, wearing the veil is seen as an expression of the women's own spirituality and religiosity: "*Wearing the veil/hijab, guides me, reminds me of the spiritual values in which I believe*", (respondent 4). "*The hijab is a sign of the relation between myself and Allah, no one has to come in it*", (respondent 7); "*Wearing the veil makes me feeling complete, to be myself; without it, I feel naked*" (respondent 2). "*I started praying at a young age and this is what gives me strength, it is a moment dedicated to myself, and it makes me self-confident*" (respondent 6). Discovering and reconstructing their religious self-identity has not been an easy process for all the respondents due to the societal structures which they had to deal with, "*Six years ago, probably* [I] *would have said that I was not a Muslim. Now I can tell that I am completing a process of understanding of who I am in terms of being a woman and a Muslim. Before I felt that my parent's culture was not part of me and because of my experiences, I refused it. When I was little, I wanted to be accepted by the external world so I did not want to be associated with being a Muslim*", (respondent 10).

4.4. Assimilation with a dual Identity

The respondents did not recognise themselves with the definition of immigrant and unanimously associate themselves with the country of residence. Being identified as an immigrant upset the respondents because the decision to migrate had been taken by their parents, and irrespectively if they arrived in the country at a very young age or were born in the country, they all felt Italians.

"*I do not define myself an immigrant, it is a definition that makes me feel out of place; I have lived all my life in Italy and I feel 100% Italian",* (respondent 2). *"I do*

not define myself an immigrant, I could say that I was born here [arrived at the age of 4] *and I arrived in Italy by plane not on a boat"* (respondent 3). *"I do not define myself as an immigrant; my parents are immigrants because they decided to leave Egypt and come to Italy. I arrived when I was 3 months, I regard myself as I was born here, like my sisters, I did not decide to leave Egypt"* (respondent 4).

The respondents, on the other hand indicate that it is the society, "the others" that, call them immigrants, "*No, it is the others that look at me as an immigrant*" (respondent 1); "*The others look at me as an immigrant, this because I wear a veil* (respondent 3*). Assumptions related to their exterior look or the foreign name make native Italians consider them as immigrants, "*I am considered an immigrant because people cannot believe that an Italian woman can be black or wear the veil*" (respondent 4); "*I am an Italian of second generation, but I look differently, I don't have an Italian surname"* (respondent 6).

In line with the segmented assimilation theory (Portes, Min, 1993), what emerges from the interviews is that external factors, do affect the assimilation/inclusion process, (Boundless, 2016). Prejudices, discriminations and the underlying government policies can enhance or lessen the sense of belonging. Respondent 9, with Italian nationality, specifies that she empathizes with the immigrants because she still experiences the feeling of being an immigrant:

> "…having arrived in Italy at 10 months and schooled here, I was not different from the others. I have the same cultural background, the same Italian feeling as the others, but for the State there were no differences between myself and the refugees or the latest migrants arrived by boats. I felt as an illegitimate daughter, spending 30 years of my life to renew the residence permit every year, I have been deprived of many rights, … for so long I have not been considered as an Italian citizen, I have not been able to vote.".

4.5. Being a bridge between different cultures

Reflecting on the way forward to change the existing account of Muslim women in Italy, the respondents felt compelled to use their knowledge and experiences to challenge and modify the existing stereotypes on both Muslim women and overall, the individuals with a migrant background. They regarded themselves as a bridge between the cultures, a conduit between the different and interconnected milieu in which they live, "*I feel I have a mission to explain who I am, to build a sort of bridge between two cultures*" (respondent 1).

Although not all the respondents believed that Muslims in general, and

Muslim women in particular, have the obligation to explain and justify who they are, all agreed that to reduce the misunderstanding between the two communities, it is important to represent Muslim women as they are, in their daily life. Respondent 9 indicates that "*Normalize the imagine will be beneficial since it will indicate that Muslims are like the other citizens and do not represent a threat*" while respondent 6 stresses that "*It is important to engage the non-Muslim community to show them that Muslim are not different from the others; that is the only way to change the negative imagine presented by the media*". Respondent 4, a social media influencer, reveals that "*I appear doing normal things, going to school, discussing with my mother, speaking about boyfriends*".

Concomitantly there is the awareness that, while it is necessary to give a better and more realistic representation of both the Islam and the Muslim women, it is also important to act on an individual level to open up the Muslim communities.

Ultimately it appears that discriminations motivated most of the respondents to get involved in social activities, respondent 4 expressly indicates that: "*I do encourage Muslim women to explain and engage in communication with non-Muslims, this helps to build bridges*". Knowing themselves, being self-confident and, more notably, not having a victim's attitude, helps in communicating with the others and, as denoted by respondent 2, allows to share experiences, "*Often, we* feel *that we are different from the other (Italian) women, that is our reading of the context, but we are not different … when I am going out and sit with my friends of different cultures and ethnicity (Italian, Somali, Egyptian, etc.) we are all the same, we discuss of the same problems, we have the same dreams*".

5. Discussion

The paper examines the narrative of a group of young Muslim women with a migratory background, using the respondents' point of observation to assess the multifaced components of discrimination, in this moving away from considering this sub category of citizens/residents more as objects than subjects of analysis, (Conte, 2009). Five explanatory categories have emerged as interpretative elements of this phenomenon, which provide additional data to understand the inclusion's process of individuals with a migratory background.

The explanatory category, *family values and patriarchism* indicates that the different roles and, in part the diverse representations of women in Italy and in the

countries of origin of the respondents or that of their parents, is a false dichotomy. The contrast between an enlightened and emancipated Italy and a backward and traditional Muslim world is deceptive, patriarchy is a common element in both societies. The objectification of the woman's body more evident in the Italian and in many Western societies lowers the women's social value (Stankiewicz and Rosselli, 2008; Carrotte, Prichard and Lim, 2017), and is expression of patriarchy, in the same way as the traditional roles African Muslim women are consciously or unconsciously forced to take. As result of the above considerations the respondents agree that the formal equality enjoined by women in Italy often does not translate into an effective equality. As described by respondent 8, "*Irrespective of nationality, religious believe, social status, the common denominator in both countries is the same. Women's will is subordinate to society's expectation, moulded by men who presume women should behave in a specific wa*y". The different roles and, in part the diverse representation of women in the two contexts, are ultimately associated to the extension of women's rights which are more ample in Italy and less in the country of origin of the respondents or that of their parents. What emerges from the respondents' narrative, is also an image of strong Muslim women, which breaks the stereotypes of them as oppressed and backward, (Korteweg, Yurdakul, 2009). As put by respondent 10 "*I can demonstrate to the outside world that a Muslim woman with migrant background can be equal to the men and be successful*". All women, albeit with a different degree of openness, make an act of accuse of the patriarchy, not considered inherent in the Islamic doctrine. Respondent 7 indicates that "*Putting women in a subservient position is not a predicament of Islam but of a patriarchal interpretation of the Quran by the men*"; also "Although *it is not well-known Islam does not indicate a submissive role for the women*" respondent 3.

Contrary to Vanzan (2012) findings, this act of accuse of patriarchy does stimulate a deeper self-analysis from the respondents who exercise their agency powers. In many ways, this unusual image of Islam and the women positive attitude, echoes similar finding from van Es, (2017) who describes Dutch Muslim women as ambassadors of a more enlighten and progressive Islam, women who are engaged in the society and are capable of being agents of change.

With reference to the explanatory category *fear of the other, fear of Muslim and discrimination*, it emerges the feeling that the fear towards the Muslim women, and the Islam in general, is originated by the fact that this category is either essentially invisible, has never been properly/correctly represented in the media

(Nurradine, 2017; Dennisons and Drazanová, 2018). In this way the Muslim women lose their identity to assume a stereotyped identity which is superimposed on them (Chaudary, 2020), an image often used to inflame a 'war of cultures' (Khalidi, 2017) rather than to promote a more inclusive society. Our findings corroborate the idea that stereotyped representation has a stronger effect on immigration attitudes and it influences the way migrants, or those associated with migrants are perceived. Nevertheless, new media instruments such as Instagram or Tik Tok are, little by little, changing the representation of both the migrants in general and the Muslim women in particular, (Evolvi, 2017). These media are, however, mostly used by the younger generations, since the adults (40 years and above) still prefer to use the traditional media, (TV and newspaper).

The explanatory category *religion as a form of identity* and *assimilation with a dual identify*, are somehow intertwined. It appears that the identification with the parents' religion helps the women with a migrant background interviewed to construct their personal identity, which however, does not prevent the construction of a national Italian identity. This new identity containing both ethnic/religious and national elements, as noted by Spiegler (2019), is often present among Muslim minority adolescents in Western Europe. It expedites the inclusion process, particularly when rights such as the acquisition of the citizenship are obtained at an early age, (Fleischmann and Phalet, 2018).

The concept of personal and collective responsibility, already emerged in the theme fear of the other, fear of the Muslim and discrimination, re-appears when discussing the religious identity of the respondents. The veil which makes them identifiable as both foreigners and Muslims, shapes and motivates the respondents in being active to try to change the vision of Muslim women and Islam in the country of residence. In other words, they are aware of being a *bridge among two cultures*. By being active in both the Italian and Muslim communities, they can contribute to improve the understanding of each other, a way to foster national identification and inclusion in their country of residence.

6. Conclusions

Although the sample interviewed cannot be considered as representative of all African Muslim women with a migrant background, the paper's conclusions going beyond the cross section of population being researched, allows to make

generalizations about the processes and relationships that have emerged from the context analysed through the interviewees' narratives (Beaud, Weber, 2010). The findings provide as well information on how to deal with prejudices and stereotype in the Italian society and contribute to the current debate on inclusion. It validated that Muslim culture, is mostly associated to a negative perception connected either to serious violence/terrorism actions or to a fundamentalist religious interpretation of the gender position in the Islam, creating a dichotomous vision of conflict between cultures and a barrier to the inclusion process (Foner, Alba, 2015). More interestingly the study's results show feeble evidence of cultural conflict in the respondents' narratives. Emerge the existence of a successful negotiation, although in same cases after a long personal acculturation process, among the culture of the parents and the one acquired successively, in line with similar studies carried out on Dutch and Polish Muslim women (van Eis, 2017; Stojkow, Zuchowska-Skiba, 2018), which leads to the construction of dual or bicultural identity.The paper's findings confirm that the 'second generations' of immigrants, unlike their parents, belong to fluid cultures, open and multiethnic, that go beyond the idea of a culture of origin considered as a rigid homogeneous container, (Rosina 2021). In accord with Fleischmann and Phalet (2018, p. 45) remark that "*there is no inherent conflict between European national identities and Muslims' religious identity*" the empirical observations indicate that the respondents' identity ultimately combines elements of Western/Italian and Muslim culture hence has a hybrid nature, which permits them to change and adapt depending on the situation they deal with.

On the other hand, experiences with discrimination and prejudice lead to considerably lower the respondents' feelings of belonging, as found for other European countries immigrants (OECD/EU 2018). Citizenship however, appears as an enabler of inclusion. In this, the findings add value to the current debate on the identity and sense of belonging of the second generations' migrants (Valtolina, Marrazzi, 2006; Istat, 2020). It is clear from the respondents' narrative that the difficulties encountered in obtaining the Italian citizenship are reasons of concern because, even if citizenship would not make them less identifiable as 'immigrant', it would provide them with rights and enhance their confidence to deal with the different forms of harassment and discrimination.

This young people with a migratory background interviewed, born or raised in Italy must be considered as mediators between different cultures. The sense of responsibility, which has emerged as a *file rouge* during the interviews, indicates the

respondents' consciousness to act as a bridge between the ways of being and doing associated with the parents' context of origin and the place where they live, to achieve an inclusive and intercultural society.

It is important to stress that some of the respondents, although subject to discrimination, associated it with an act based on the ignorance of the perpetuators rather than with racism. One interpretation could be that in this way they did not feel as victims, since it is relatively easier do deal with ignorance than racism. Concurrently one could also argue that by not naming the discriminatory actions as racist, the respondents tried to blend-in, to be accepted by the majority of the Italian population. Those are aspects worthwhile engaging in further research, while enlarging the sample to other categories of female with a migrant background.

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