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# *Family Migration and Educational Mobility. Pathways to Success in the Autobiographies of Girls of Moroccan Origin*

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## **Abstract**

The article proposes an in-depth analysis of the link between family migration and educational mobility, using data deriving from an original qualitative study on successful students with an immigrant background. First, a conceptual framework is provided, identifying some crucial theoretical and empirical issues concerning migrant families: educational mobility as a family strategy and project; the challenges of intergenerational transmission in revisiting cultural and ethnic identities; the importance of the “act of passing on” through family relations. Second, autobiographies of students of immigrant origin are used to examine whether and in what conditions family functions as a driver of educational success. Through the biographical approach, strategies and narratives students adopt to represent family migration and the relationships with parents are reconstructed. Finally, using the outlined conceptual frame, the emblematic stories of Amna, Ikram, and Sole, three girls of Moroccan origin, are chosen and analyzed, in order to illustrate different ways values, norms, and behaviors are negotiated in order to reshape family identities and ties, towards the common goal of educational success.

**Keywords:** Family migration, educational success, students with an immigrant background, intergenerational transmission, biographical approach.

## *Introduction*

Migration is a family project for upward social mobility. In particular, migrant families hope to offer their children a better future through the educational opportunities that are unavailable in their countries of origin. The fact that immigrant parents were mobile and ambitious enough to migrate already distinguishes them from non-immigrant families (Schneider, Crul & Van Praag, 2014).

Empirical evidence shows that students with an immigrant background live in a better social condition compared to that of their parents and have higher school performances, especially if they are girls (Unesco, 2019). Recent data also shows that school success is possible for vulnerable migrant students and nearly one fourth of this group, in OECD countries,

does achieve it (2018). This phenomenon highlights that the family background of immigrants does not represent merely a social disadvantage, transmitted from one generation of immigrants to another (Bourdieu & Passeron, 1970). In families with few or no resources – as migrant families often are – where there is no capital to pass on, there are still non-tangible assets, as well as the family's history, that can offer support in the difficult, but not impossible, route towards educational success and social mobility in the country of arrival (Delcroix, 2019).

Undoubtedly, migrant families play a key role in the complex and broader process of handing down material and immaterial resources, including those experiences, feelings, identities, meanings, and values, which can affect the careers and projects of new generations. This process still needs to be analyzed further, focusing on the renegotiation and adaptation of relationships and expectations across generations (Attias-Donfut & Cook, 2017). Starting from this premise, the article proposes an in-depth analysis of the link between family migration, educational mobility, and intergenerational transmission, using data deriving from an original qualitative study on a group of successful students with an immigrant background.

In the following paragraphs, 1. I will provide a conceptual framework in order to analyse and interpret the research results. Reviewing the sociological literature on family migration and children's education, I identify three crucial aspects, referring to structural, cultural, and relational dynamics. Specifically, I will present some considerations on educational mobility as a family project, focusing on the contents and mechanisms of intergenerational transmission that foster success, considering cultural continuities and discontinuities, agreement or conflicts among generations. 2. Then, I will present the *Su.Per. Project* (Santagati, 2019), on which my analysis is based. The autobiographies of a group of successful students of immigrant origin, collected in a set of upper secondary schools in Northern Italy, allow me to examine whether and in what conditions family is a driver of educational success. Using the biographical approach, I will reconstruct themes, strategies and narratives students adopt to represent family migration and the relationships with their parents, reflecting on the pursuit of success through education. 3. Finally, using the outlined conceptual frame, I will present and analyze the autobiographies of Amna, Ikram, and Sole, three adolescent girls of Moroccan origin, whose stories

illustrate different ways subjects can negotiate their role as successful students, both within the family and in the school environment, reshaping generational identities and ties in their host country.

## *1. Conceptual Framework*

To analyze the successful trajectories of immigrant students, first, a conceptual framework is outlined, in order to sum up some issues that are crucial in the literature, exploring the link between family migration and investment on education.

### *1.1 Educational Mobility as a Family Strategy*

Sociological studies agree that migration represents a family project of intergenerational mobility, in which education represents the main route to success (Azzolini, Mantovani & Santagati, 2019). In general, students with an immigrant background do better than their parents in school and have good performances, but their successful trajectories are viewed as “unexpected pathways” in the US research (Haller, Portes & Scott, 2011). Indeed, many social, cultural, and context conditions offer second-generation immigrants, particularly girls, an alternative biographical trajectory: for example, the opportunity to choose one’s education and, later, one’s profession; the possibility of achieving a higher level of education than their parents or mothers; these are the main opportunities offered to second-generation women.

This process of upward mobility is confirmed also in European studies on the rise of a new elite including young people with immigrant parents, who gain entry into high-ranking positions of leadership (Crul et al., 2016). This group reveals new patterns for social mobility – based on a slow and gradual accumulation of resources and opportunities over time – that allow second-generations to move into a social world that their ethnic group has never previously inhabited in the country of immigration.

This structural process of educational and social mobility is rooted, according to the research tradition on “immigrant optimism” (Kao & Tienda, 1995), in a specific set of values, which is distinctive of migrant families, an ethos based on sacrifice, social redemption and emancipation,

that explains the strong educational motivations to succeed transmitted by migrants to their children (Colombo & Santagati, 2010). These values are also typical of the children who, often in the face of parental failure, believe in hard work and commitment in order to succeed in their individual and family project. They are extremely powerful and propel students to sacrifice much of their social life in order to focus on their education.

The significance of migration as an investment in their offspring's education made by immigrant parents creates a strong sense of obligation towards the parents, as well as pressure on the children, but emerges as part of an optimistic vision of the immigrant as someone who hopes in the improvement of life conditions and in social mobility for the whole family (Portes & Hao, 2004). All immigrant parents have high educational aspirations for their offspring and, consequently, aspirations are indeed a key explanatory factor of the educational success of their children, as parents' high ambitions translate into support for and expectations of their offspring's perseverance in education.

### *1.2 Intergenerational Transmission: Revisiting Cultural and Ethnic Identities*

Migratory experience varies from one generation to another, often amplifying and exacerbating generational differences: migration represents an experience of cultural change for families and different generations of migrants that reshapes life courses, restructuring family life in a new socio-cultural setting (Attias-Donfut & Cook, 2017).

An inevitable implication of family migration is the transformation of the socialization process, whereby the contents of what is transmitted can no longer be taken for granted, and values, norms, and memories have to be revisited in a situation where reflections and discourses around the self are particularly intensified and challenged. In the passage from the first to the second generation, the chain of transmission can be interrupted and a generational discontinuity often occurs in various cultural domains, such as belonging, identity, language, religion, way of life, women's role, values, etc. The shift of place due to the migratory experience complexifies the generational transition, creating a discontinuous process which fosters distancing from those attitudes and affiliations held in the country of origin, in favor of membership in the new society (Salih, 2000).

Second-generation biographies highlight aspects of both continuity with and rupture from the previous generations, for example in the realm of ethnic, gender, and religious identities (Crespi, Santoni & Zanier, 2017, p. 195). From a sociological point of view, however, people do not permanently belong to a certain group and identities are not fixed, but rather are context-, meaning- and time-specific and they involve shifts and contradictions. The concept of “social location”, proposed by Anthias (2011), seems adequate to analyze the “changing identities” of second-generations, considering cross-cutting dimensions such as gender, ethnicity, and religion, as opportunities and constraints interacting with the chances provided by the social structure. Ethnic and gender identities are constructed and reconstructed, in a process that includes meanings, actions, and practices, which gives a temporary definition to self and otherness.

These socio-cultural contents of intergenerational transmission, however, seem to be an *ambivalent inheritance*, which includes both resources and constraints. On the one side, the children of immigrants share some of these resources with their parents, adopting some of these cultural aspects. In this intergenerational process, for example, religious references are important, especially among Muslim families, which represent an important and increasing part of immigrants in Europe (Al-Rebholz, 2013): in this case, children have a mandate to perpetuate cultural and religious traditions. However, there also families who adopt educational norms less geared toward the transmission of tradition and more focused on child development and, as time passes, migrant children are increasingly moving away from strict religious observance (Belhaj et al., 2017). Changes in gender relations are also taking place, following the decline of traditional patriarchal norms: sometimes, women experience a process of liberation in the host country, a way of escaping from a controlling and hostile social environment, by encountering educational opportunities that offer girls greater freedom.

In any case, the definitions of tradition and modernity are not unchangeable, as tradition should be understood as that set of day-to-day knowledge and practices through which a symbolic space can be changed and reconstructed. Among Muslim women, research identifies a process of negotiation of their multiple belongings and consequent reconstruction of the social link between subjectivity and the public sphere (Massari, 2014): different narratives and strategies concerning modernity and being

modern, which oscillate between inheriting and revisitating one's religious affiliation, coexist and often overlap within the complex cultural scenario of European societies (Acocella, Cigliuti, 2016). Certainly, second-generation immigrants appear more able than their parents to draw from multiple frames of reference and cultural traditions, because their immigrant background has made them well-equipped to function in a multi-ethnic and diverse environment.

### *1.3 Intergenerational Transmission: the Importance of the Act of Passing on*

The intergenerational transmission of values, norms, and belongings develops through family relations that are maintained, revisited, and changed across time and space: the process of socialization depends on families' capacity to give meaning to past and present experiences, and on parents' ability to legitimate their own culture of origin in a dynamic way, eschewing silences and contradictions.

In her studies on working-class families originating from Maghreb, Delcroix collected life stories from both parents and their offspring, in order to demonstrate that the aim of intergenerational transmission is to pass something on: the *act* of 'passing on something' is, in and of itself, the most important point, more than *what* is actually passed on. Moreover, in families with scarce resources and non-tangible assets, both moral values and love can be passed on, thus giving meaning to the migratory experience (2019, p. 42). After all, intergenerational transmission is an important social action *per se*: it means placing children in the generational tree, showing them that they are one among others. They are originated by others: this reveals and exposes a social world that is already there, and will generate something new or similar to previous generations, and will have to be passed on to others in the future (Sarthou-Lajus, 2018, pp. 20-21).

This act of transmission is very important in migrant families: family migration reveals itself as a profoundly relational experience, which shapes the everyday life of different generations, both before, during, and after migration, intervening on how family members interact with each other. The migratory experience changes social relationships by altering intergenerational and gender roles, drawing upon and transforming emotional bonds (Crespi, Santoni & Zanier, 2017).

Within migration studies there are two main (opposite) propositions used to describe family change following migration. On the one hand, family cohesion has been assumed to be stronger in immigrant families, compared to non-migrant families in receiving countries (Albertini, Mantovani, Gasperoni, 2019). On the other hand, greater levels of conflict and disintegration have been recognized in migrant families, given the contradiction between traditional family values and the drive for individualization of the country of arrival (Attias-Donfut, Cook, 2017). However, neither of these hypothesis has really been validated so far. Rather, research has revealed the fluid nature of relationships within migrant families and the complex process of renegotiation that take place within both generations, which involves elements of restructuring, contestation, compromise and sometimes conflict. However, conflicts and solidarity are not incompatible and often coexist in settlement processes in order to foster the successful development of children in a new environment (Santagati, 2020)

## *2. A Study on Successful Students with an Immigrant Background*

Drawing on this conceptual framework, I use qualitative data collected in 2017 during the Su.Per. project (*Success in educational pathways of students with immigrant background*: Santagati, 2019), to analyze the different roles of the migrant family in the pathway towards educational success for their offspring.

The research is based on written autobiographies of students attending upper secondary schools in Northern Italy (Province of Brescia) and aims at identifying factors that lead to educational excellence, highlighting difficulties and obstacles that these young people have to face. The educational autobiographies of these students are used, in this article, to deepen our understanding of the mechanisms, strategies and narratives they adopt to describe migration and family experiences, reflecting on the implications of their past, on the pursuit of success through education in the present, and on their imagination of the future. The biographical approach enabled me to reflect not only on *what* is transmitted between different generations (material and immaterial resources), but also to

consider *how* the process develops through specific intergenerational relations (Apitzsch & Siouti, 2014).

Students wrote independent educational autobiographies, using a self-interview grid, used to guide them in recollecting and recounting the most relevant experiences, encounters, emotions and choices in their educational trajectory. The grid was structured in 34 points, with an introductory presentation and a final section on personal data (for the methodology, cf. Santagati, 2018). The students' narratives give access to the ways they understand and interpret their place in the world: they are stories of location, dislocation and relocation (Anthias, 2002, p. 498); of migrants belonging to different generations, that intersect the host society, their homeland, and migrant groupings. These three dimensions are not just physical, but are also cultural and symbolic: as Anthias points out, the stories produced in the migration process are more than merely stories, as they involve modes of making sense of the dislocation, in an active way.

In the following analysis, I focus on the autobiographies of some Italian-Moroccan girls, selected among the 65 collected stories (44 girls, including 12 of Moroccan origin): their stories are emblematic of the pathways of children and parents belonging to one of the largest migrant communities present in Italy. It is a community of older settlers, characterized by a significant duration of stays and stability in terms of family presence, especially in the Regions of Northern Italy, with a relevant presence of student of Moroccan origin, but born in Italy, in the school system (Santagati & Colussi, 2020). Furthermore, the class position (characterized by low socio-economic status), cultural origins and religious affiliations of these families (mainly Muslims) make this group quite interesting to analyze in terms of the process of intergenerational transmission, and its consequences on the relationships between generations and between genders.

For the analysis, I take into account specific questions of the self-interview grid I consider to be particularly relevant for the aims of this article. Firstly, the texts have been analysed using open coding, in order to identify students' narratives and define some key points, which were then used to develop a focused coding grid, based on the three aspects outlined in the initial conceptual framework:

1. Choice of upper secondary school; choices after upper secondary school; future projects (EDUCATIONAL MOBILITY)
2. Effects of immigration (or parental migration) on my educational career and experience (FAMILY MIGRATION and RELATIONSHIPS)
3. Who am I? Am I a successful student? What helps me be a successful student? (CULTURAL TRANSMISSION AND FAMILY RELATIONS)

After an in-depth analysis of the 12 biographies of the girls of Moroccan origin participating in the project, I chose to focus on the autobiographies of three successful students. I consider their stories as emblematic and useful in shedding light on the interconnections of the three elements discussed so far (educational mobility, cultural transmission, family relations, etc.). Indeed, the reflections of Amna, Ikram, and Sole on the link between family migration and educational experience may offer some insight on family relations, generations, and migration, confirming the fluid and complex renegotiation that take place across generations to ensure the successful settlement of the family and of their daughters in a new environment.

### *3. Differentiated Pathways to Success: the Stories of Amna, Ikram, and Sole*

#### *3.1. Amna: Trusting in Education and in God, Living in a Good Family*

Amna was born in Morocco in 2000. She came to Italy legally with her mother at the age of three in order to join to her father, who had immigrated for work and was, at the time, well-established in the city of Brescia. Amna is the first of four children and she is the only one born in Morocco. Her parents belong to the working-class: her father has a diploma and works as a welder. Amna can be defined as a second-generation migrant, whose educational career took place wholly within the Italian school system: when the study was conducted, she was a seventeen years-old student, attending a Human Sciences lyceum.

For the purposes of her autobiography, she decided to call herself “Amna”, an Arabic female name meaning “peace”: in her name, as her story highlights, she tries to combine family values and her school experience in a harmonious way. She experiences an unexpected and

challenging educational path for the daughter of immigrants, thanks to the material and emotional support of her family and within a frame of cultural continuity with respect to her parents in most domains (religion, language, values).

Who is Amna? Amna presents herself as a girl of Moroccan origin. Since the beginning of her text, Amna highlights the main characteristics of her identity: she defines herself as a “normal Muslim girl”, definition in which the normality seems to emerge from her attempt to combine character qualities linked to diverse value systems: in fact, she is Muslim and thus serious, controlled, loyal, helpful; at the same time, she is dynamic, proactive, ambitious, a girl who wants to be empowered through education, despite her immigrant background.

*Amna is a normal seventeen-year-old Muslim girl, she is very active, full of desires and, above all, full of dreams to achieve. My family knows my qualities well, these are: determination, self-control, seriousness, loyalty. Perhaps I'm also stubborn and quick-tempered. There are two aspects that only those who know me see: my desire to help others and my desire to become a doctor.*

**From the lyceum to university.** Amna was “lucky enough” to arrive in Italy before the beginning of kindergarten, an experience which ensured she was exposed to essentially the same learning conditions as her peers. She chose the lyceum, a turning point in her educational path, from which she gradually decides she would like to continue studying at university. Amna considers education as the only way to transform impossible dreams in pragmatic plans and realistic goals which one can achieve: good marks and the high quality of the institute she is attending have convinced her to cultivate a challenging project. The choice of the lyceum constitutes a central biographical turning point (Al-Rebholz, 2014): the most important and unique rupture in her life project.

*I chose to go to a Lyceum and, therefore, I automatically made another choice: to go to university. I think university is the key to make my dreams come true: I'd like to graduate in medicine and become a doctor. School is an institution where we spend a lot of time... my classmates, sometimes, see school as a prison... for me school is the only means to achieve my goals, it is also a way to model my personality, to increase my culture, to improve... I am a realistic girl and I don't like to fantasize,*

*but I have many dreams and if I want them to come true I have to be pragmatic. These dreams will only come true if I believe in myself and, above all, in education. Initially I chose this school with the intention to continue studying Nursing. But, during upper secondary education, I realized I could expect more from school... I understood that my school gave me a good cultural background, so that I can achieve more ambitious goals... From wanting to be a simple nurse, I started to aspire to be a doctor.*

The change in her university project – from “nurse” to “doctor” – represents, for Amna, an imagined educational mobility via higher education, in which the role of her family is crucial for different reasons: Amna’s parents have given her moral support, they have taught her to persevere and persist, to wait and to be patient, to trust in her talent and in God, to engage in education: these are the qualities that can ensure the success of future projects.

*I am a very determined girl and I have a motto: jamais abandonner, that means “never give up”. It is thanks to my motto and to the moral support of my parents, if I am a girl aware of her skills and inclinations... I can say I am at the beginning of my long journey. My parents have taught me to wait patiently and to live the present, sure I could realize my projects in the future... As we say in Arabic: من قصد باب دخله ولو من حديد. The translation sounds like that: “Whoever knocks on a door will enter although it is made of iron”. The meaning is this: if you focus on a goal that seems impossible, you will achieve it. God willing, you will achieve your goals, but... let things take their course.*

Amna is also identified by her teachers as a “successful student” and participated to the Su.Per. project. Writing her educational story, she affirms that her migrant background is the point of distinction in her biography, one aspect of pride for herself and her family, that makes a difference compared to her other classmates: linguistic and cultural competences and awareness are generated by the migratory experience, by the habit of moving and a curiosity towards otherness.

*My migrant background is my strong point: I am proud of being an immigrant. If I was a girl like the others, I do not think my teachers would select me as an excellent*

*student. I would not be able to speak four languages, to know about many cultures, to be so open-minded.*

**Intergenerational Continuity in an Open Society.** Undoubtedly, Amna's assumption that her migrant background is a factor of success implies that family and cultural origins are crucial in her pathway to success. Amna affirms the primacy of her Muslim identity over her Moroccan identity, stressing that her family makes the active choice of maintaining their cultural roots, by practicing Islam, reading and studying the Koran, and using Arabic in everyday life. However, this cultural continuity between her country of origin and her country of arrival, as Amna writes, is not in contrast with Italian culture, but rather it is made possible by the nature of the Italian social environment, which offers the right conditions to benefit from freedom of expression, worship, and opinion.

*I am a Moroccan girl, but primarily I am a Muslim girl. My family and I have decided not to forget our roots, even if we are not in our country. We have done so by maintaining our religion, culture and language. My brothers, sisters, and I have studied the Koran and the Arabic language, and at home we speak Arabic. If we have been able to keep our traditions alive, it is thanks to Italian society, which is very open and tolerant.*

However, the decision to migrate provokes irreversible consequences on certain cultural habits and practices, producing a cultural mix within each single components of a migrant family. The feeling of extraneousness perceived both in Morocco and in Italy are evident in Amna 's lifestyle, which is considered modern, transgressive, or traditionalistic, depending on the situational point of view. In Amna's account, this is the "natural" consequence of migration: an adaptation that is always partial and incomplete, and never completely adheres to either of the two "presumed" cultures she has inherited.

*In my opinion, migration presents one negative aspect, namely that of staying away from your home country and feeling as a foreigner both in Italy and in your home country... When we moved here we chose to be foreigners in Italy and in Morocco. We live in Italy, but belong to another culture. During our settlement in Italy, we have witnessed the mix of the two cultures directly and it is not possible*

*to divide them now. Let me explain: when I am in Morocco I act like an Italian, I use the ways of doing and thinking of Italian people and this makes me appear like a foreigner in my country. I'll offer an example: in Morocco girls go out only if accompanied by a family member; my brothers and I used to go out unaccompanied and Moroccan society sees us as transgressors, anti-traditionalists or even sinners. The same thing happens in Italy, when I do not go dancing on Saturday night because I prefer to stay at home and watch a good movie with my family. Here I am considered as a traditionalist, because I do not share the same idea of fun. This happens because we live in two nations, two ethnicities, two cultures. Thanks to this, we have an open mind, but we cannot completely belong to either country.*

**Family, a Place of Support, Love, and Respect.** High performances and high expectations in the educational field are the main traits of Amna's autobiography: these traits are rooted in the family experience – both cultural and religious – in which Amna receives and learns character qualities, attitudes and values. Some evidence of this process of cultural transmission comes from the description of the good relationships between Amna and her parents. Amna gives particular importance to the exclusive relation with her mother, characterized by trust, mutual understanding, and constant proximity. Mother and daughter are 'best friends', in Amna's words, because they have grown into their roles together and they know each other very well. Amna uses two arguments to explain the specificity of her relationship with her mother: unlike many young people who consider their parents to be their worst enemies, Amna opposes to this view, declaring that her family includes her best and only friends. Moreover, she recalls a sura of the Koran to remark the emotional and spiritual significance of mothers, linking together parental role, religious and cultural values, and meaningful relationships in an excellent synthesis.

*A friendship that began when I was born and I hope it will last until we die, that is my relationship my mom. With her I have always had a wonderful relationship based on mutual trust and understanding. It has always been present, at all times, I grew up with her and she grew up with me. My mom is the only one who really knows me and knows everything about me, as one of the Koran suras says: "heaven is under the feet of our mothers". Many young people consider their parents their bitter enemies, whereas for me they are my only friends, especially my mom.*

The positive dynamics of Amna's family emerge in the narration concerning the moment when she had to choose her upper secondary education, a very important step both for the student and for her parents. On the one hand, Amna's family represents a 'good place', in which love, respect, and support allow freedom of choice and, above all, have enabled Amna to follow her inclinations, desires and dreams, by enrolling in a lyceum and thinking about gaining access to the Faculty of Medicine. This is an unexpected path for a daughter of immigrants, but it was made possible thanks to the material and moral support of her family: her parents' trust in Amna and her maturity, her mother's ability to console her in contrast to the prejudice and skepticism of others, the positive words that circulated in her family, the high educational expectations and pride of her family members. On the other hand, however, teachers and classmates have low expectations for Amna's educational and career choices, they say negative words and are full of prejudice: they predict educational failure and recommend low-profile school choices, as the only route that might be expected for a student with an immigrant background. Although the voice of the family seems to be louder than that of teachers, the support of family and the help of God represent for Amna her strong points in order to achieve her dreams, or at least to persevere and imagine a positive future for herself as a doctor.

*During these past few years, I have made choices that will affect my future, especially the choice of upper secondary school. This choice was very important to me, and it was important for my parents too. My teachers do not trust me and they advised me to attend a vocational center because, in their opinion, I should expect to fail soon. But I decided to follow my heart and my parents. I respect and love my parents very much. They gave me the freedom to choose and their full support in doing so. I still remember a phrase my father said when I asked him to help me: «make your choice and follow your heart. I shall not intervene in your choice, you are now a mature girl and you know what you want, I will support you economically and morally, I will not demand anything from you, I will only ask you to make me proud». My mother, on the other hand, dried the tears my teachers and classmates provoked with their racist prejudices and remarks. There is a phrase said by a classmate of mine that I remember very well and that really bothered me: «the only thing you can grow up to do is mop floors, you will never be a doctor in a hospital». After hearing the good words of my parents and the bad words of the*

*society I live in, I decided – being a very stubborn person – to follow my heart and choose a Lyceum. I am very proud of myself, of my parents and of my choices. God willing, with the support of my parents, I will make my dream – which is also that of my mother – come true: I shall become a doctor. By doing this I am sure that I will make my father proud.*

### 3.2. Ikram: Uncertainties in Educational and Biographical Choices

Ikram was born in Italy in 2000 and she has an Italian citizenship. Her parents have lived in Italy for 30 years but they finished compulsory school in Morocco: her father is a factory worker and her mother takes care of their two children. Their migration follows the typical path of a Moroccan family, with the reunification of the wife with the husband who immigrated 10 years earlier. During the research, Ikram was attending a vocational institute, that she does not consider the right choice for her future job.

For the Su.Per. Project, Ikram choose an Arabic name whose meaning is “honor”: she defines herself as “the third generation of her family in Europe”, an Italian-Moroccan girl, trying to combine Italian and Western cultural aspects with her Moroccan and Muslim origins. She is, at one and the same time, ‘Italianized’ but devoted to her Moroccan culture, occasionally risking a clash between these opposite cultural trends in everyday life.

*I am Ikram, an Italian-Moroccan girl, born in Italy in 2000... I am the third generation in Europe, because my grandfather, the father of my father, emigrated to France, while my father preferred Italy. My family is scattered all over the world: I have relatives in Morocco, Spain, Italy, France, Lebanon, although we never manage to meet. The main reason for emigration was the lack of work for everyone: everyone fought for their dreams, they fought for a dignified life. I am very Italianized, I have Italian friends, I follow Western culture. Despite this, I could never give up on my origins, which I love and try to keep alive within me, day after day, even if many times it is difficult and I find myself clashing with real life.*

**An Unusual Professional Choice.** During the project, Ikram was attending a vocational institute, chosen because it was close to home. She considers this to be a wrong choice, which did not correspond to her

ambitions, and felt it will probably not be very useful for her chosen future career as a flight attendant. On the one hand, the choice of a vocational track is quite expected in pathways of students with an immigrant background, within families featured by low economic and cultural capital. On the other hand, Ikram imagines in the future a sort of rupture of her biographical trajectory, expressing her preference for an unusual job for Moroccan girls of her community.

*I did not expect much from high school... Honestly I think I made the biggest mistake of my life to choose a school only because it was close to home. Actually, at the end of middle school, I had no ideas, I did not know what I would like to do in the future. So I opted for this school, a vocational institute with a health focus, hoping that it was something I would like in the future... it wasn't like that, but I continued... now I am attending the third year, I feel good... I find no difficulty in studying. I like to study, because I think a good future is going to be influenced by the present.*

**When Parents are not an Obstacle.** Ikram highlights that her fortune is made up of the good relationships within her family, who do not prevent her integration and do not hinder her from further study. Her parents and relatives appears in her story not as an obstacle in the path towards her desired career, but rather as people that simply insinuate doubts about the challenges of achieving a good work-life balance in this job and the risks connected to flying. However, these concerns remain in the background and Ikram looks for and finds, in some ways, her meaning of life in her vision of traveling and flying, working and feeling free in the sky and in her life.

*I consider myself lucky, very lucky in many aspects, including the fact that I have a family that has not stopped my integration. Not all my peers have had this opportunity. I do not have a very clear idea about what to do at the end of the high school, but I will certainly go on to achieve my biggest dream. As I mentioned earlier, traveling for me is equivalent to life, so I will be happy to do a job where travel is key. One of my biggest goals is to be able to become a flight attendant. Since I was a child I loved planes, I had models of them, I counted them when they passed in the sky. I don't care how much I will have to study, what exams I will have to pass, this is my dream, my goal, my future job and in order to achieve it I*

*will do my best. Usually I'm not a girl who believes in herself very much, but I love this job, I really think I can do it, and I believe I will do it. Talking to family and friends they do not seem so convinced about this. They say things like "how will you manage with your future family?" or "aren't you afraid?". Well, traveling and working, flying, feeling free, alone, far from the land ... it will be wonderful.*

Ikram is seen by teachers and classmates as an excellent student, although she does not seem very convinced of this representation. On the surface, she looks confident: a girl able to live in two worlds simultaneously, able to understand, accept, and respect the different values, rules, and models of each. However, in her biography, she wrote about the negative and positive implications of immigration on her school career and, above all, and on her uncertain and confused attempts to identify and locate herself at school and among her classmates. On the one hand, she strives to make herself similar to others, but her peers look only at her diversity and exclude her. She reacts with desperation and tears, with thousands of questions, until she begins to accept and indeed enhance her physical and personality differences.

*My teachers, but also my classmates, define me as a good student and yes, I could be, but I certainly don't think I'm among the best students, because excellence is an unattainable goal. Whereas I am only a girl, who lives in two completely different worlds. She understands them, accepts them, but above all she respects their values and models. I am Ikram, the one who goes on despite everything, despite everyone. Being a daughter of immigrants has had implications on my school career, both negatively and positively. For many years, I have tried to make myself look like the others, while society prevented me, marginalized me, clearly told me "you are different". And I cried, asking myself thousands of questions: why am I different? what distinguishes me from others? the look? the character? Then I tried to get closer to the way others looked. This was a very wrong attitude, because now I find myself saying: I am different, it is true and I am also proud of it. Never abandon one's true identity to make others happy.*

**To Wear the Veil: a Choice to Postpone.** Her family appears in Ikram's writing, when she reflects on future choices she will have to make in both the cultural and religious domains. She feels quite uncertain as a girl about the transition to adulthood, postponing the decision about whether to

abandon or adhere to the religious and cultural values and practices of her family, particularly regarding the veil. To wear it, risking her hard earned integration both at school and then at work, or not to wear it, risking exclusion from her community: for Ikram, that is the question. She says that the veil does not represent an obstacle to integration, but she chooses to take her time as she still needs to convince herself of which route to take, mainly because, in a secularized society, a veiled girl could experience discrimination in the labor market.

For these reasons, Ikram seems inclined towards a cultural discontinuity with respect to the religious background of her Moroccan relatives and friends in Brescia. In this analysis, Ikram repeats many times that “her parents are not like others Muslims”, they are not so severe and they do not intend to limit her freedom of choice. But the feelings of confusion, loneliness, uselessness, and dissatisfaction are dominant in her experience, as people belonging to her Muslim community begin to say “The time is coming...”, as a negative refrain and a self-fulfilling prophecy, which Ikram can still escape, however, thanks to the liberal and understanding attitude of her family.

*A crucial passage for a non-Western girl is the transition from being a child to being a woman, and to be a woman you must behave in a specific way. Thank God my parents are not like others, but surely there are some people in my family and among my friends who are. I am a Muslim girl, but to be a good Muslim you have to wear a veil, so that some beautiful man will want to marry you. Many people believe that this no longer exists, but it does exist. Maybe there is no longer that severity. I'm sure that every person, man or woman, has freedom. Certainly in a non-Western country it is appreciated that a woman stays at home and respects some parameters, including the veil. I don't see the veil as an obstacle, but in order to wear it I need to be convinced and, above all, I need time. Living in a Western society, in a school based mainly on secularism, but above all wanting to make certain dreams come true without constraints does not help. For every girl who goes through this period, the fear is that of not being accepted, of having to throw out years of integration, just because of a different aesthetic. This is what a different girl feels: she is confused, she knows that she can go on feeling lonely for 99% of the time, but she always wants to be close to someone for the remaining 1% and she is afraid of losing that someone, simply because of a veil on her head. This has repercussions on school life, because when you are with people like you, they*

*say things like "the time is coming...". Confusion. And I think of things like loneliness. And I feel bad. I remember when I was attending the third grade and had those few friends, but they could still abandon me at the most important moments. And I feel useless, for not being able to satisfy anyone, not my family, not my friends, not myself.*

### *3.3. Sole: Inside and Outside, a Clash of Civilizations*

Sole was born in Morocco in 1997 and she arrived in Italy at the age of seven with her mother and her brother, in order to join to her father. He had settled in Brescia for the time necessary to prepare for the family reunification, thanks to a stable job and an adequate flat to receive his wife and his children. "Those who emigrate always look for something. My father was looking for a job and I was looking for a future", Sole said, pointing out the different push factors that explain the migratory process for the various members of the family. After the arrival in Brescia, the family had another two children who were born in Italy.

Sole's parents have a middle-high level of education (her father has a degree, her mother has a diploma), although the family has a low socioeconomic status due to the fact her father is a factory worker in a weak and unqualified position in the local economy.

**Escaping from the Destiny of an Immigrant through Education.** Sole arrived in Italy during primary school, starting from the 2nd Grade, interrupting the educational path she had begun in her country of origin: she did not show any specific educational or linguistic problems, and she rapidly obtained good results and a high performance. In continuity with this profile as a high-achiever, Sole attended, a lyceum first, which led to her first experience of school failure, that she linked to her attempt to challenge her disadvantaged destiny as an immigrant. After failing a year, she then changed schools, and choose a vocational institute, which became her "home", a refuge where she could avoid the internal and family conflicts connected to her religious and cultural identity; a good place to get ready to fly.

In her educational biography, Sole points out the good relationships she developed with the teachers and the negative ones she has with her peers. Teachers always saw positive aspects in Sole, who is a shy girl and an excellent student, whereas her classmates teased her for her diversity and

her marginal role in the class. In this process, she learned to defend herself by focusing on studying, reading, learning foreign languages and enjoying art. Her first choice, the lyceum, however, turns out to be problematic and Sole decides to change school, falling back on a less demanding school, as is expected of a daughter of immigrants.

In a long-term perspective, this change appears positive and, finally, Sole found a school she could call “home”, with wonderful and attentive teachers, in which she did her best, she could commit, she was able to find herself. School represents a refuge for her, where she can learn how to take care of herself and she can find adults who care, a place in which she can put on wings and learn to fly.

*Primary school was a walk in the park for me, in terms of learning. However, I did not have many friends, maybe because I was different: my classmates were not horrible to me, some were really kind, but no one was really my friend. I was always the one who was different from them, the one who comes from Morocco and who speaks another language. So I grew up with the idea that I am different. However, I was the Italian teacher’s favorite pupil. Perhaps she saw something positive in my diversity. During middle school, I was a shy girl who was good at school... a girl who was teased sometimes by her classmates... It was a time in which I learned to be strong and defend my diversity, because if you do not react, if you do not make yourself heard, people will eat you alive. I learned to value myself and I took refuge in my studies, especially literature, art and foreign languages. Reading was my salvation.*

*I passed the middle school exam with full marks, I was more and more proud of myself. I just had to choose a school after that. I chose the linguistic Lyceum, but it was not the right choice, or it was simply not meant to be. Adolescence, infatuations, suffering, friendships, quarrels with parents... one trouble after another. I was no longer the innocent and shy girl, I became something else, I became what I am today: myself. I did not pass the first year in the Lyceum and I decided to change school... Yet, it was the most correct wrong choice I have ever made. Now, I want to talk about this place I call home, my school, because here I found myself. In this school I met teachers who became beacons for me... I’m thinking that this experience will end very soon... I think that this school gave me a pair of wings and I learned to fly. I have studied hard, I have obtained good marks and also a scholarship. The worry about disappointing my teachers, those who have*

*seen so much more in my being different, and always encouraged me to give the best.*

Her chosen name, “Sole”, is an Italian name meaning “sun”, it summarizes well herself representation as a girl of the South, a Mediterranean girl, committed to managing her different cultural roots, mediating conflicts and looking for a solution to the cultural clashes she has had to face: this perspective is pursued by distancing herself from her parents and through a significant and long-term investment in education.

*I am Sole, I am an immigrant, daughter of immigrants. I was a Moroccan immigrant, but now I no longer am, because now I am Italian, the result of belonging to two different cultures, a strange Italian girl, I am olive-skinned, I have curly hair and almond-shaped eyes, that reflect both the Saharan sand and the Mediterranean sea.*

**No Relations with Parents.** For Sole school represents a ‘good place’ where she experienced care and motivation, whereas within her family (and inside herself) she is at the centre of a cultural clash represented by the discontinuity in the transition from the one generation of immigrants to the other. Her parents are described as not integrated and critical of their daughter’s Westernized habits and customs. Consequently, Sole says she has no relations with them, they often fight and argue, and she feels they have never supported her in her life choices and in her school career. The conflict is large, evident, inevitable: Sole lives contradictions and tensions between her identity, the opinions of her parents towards her behaviors and attitudes, and societal requirements and pressures. This experience has generated a sense of loneliness and self-sufficiency, where Sole has sought happiness, comfort, and trust only at school and with her teachers.

*Unlike me, my parents have not been able to integrate as well as I have, that is why I have no relationship with them. On the contrary, we often argue and fight: the clash between mentalities is quite large and evident. The relationship with my parents has never been good, they have never supported me in my choices, because according to them I am too Westernized and I behave in a way that is not typical of our culture. I have had to grow up fighting between who I am, what my parents tell me to be and what society wants me to be! You know, it is not easy to grow up*

*between two cultures, especially if they are one the opposite of the other, because the clash with parents and with oneself is inevitable.*

*Having no one who believed in me, I have had to believe in myself, alone. Over time, I have grown up on my own and I have become self-sufficient, but I have especially learned to accept myself. Am I Moroccan or am I Italian? But why can't I be both? So school became my refuge. In the morning I wake up happy because I leave home and I go to school, to a place where people believe in me. I have developed good relations with many teachers, with some I developed a relationship that is a bit like family, I joke, I laugh, we fight... in short, a relationship of trust, what I have not experienced at home.*

**A clash of cultures.** Migration is a process of no return, given the changes that derive from it in terms of identity, ways of thinking, etc. For Sole, this was the positive effect of migration, but for her family it was not the same. She can say she is a full-fledged Italian and Moroccan, she does not want to choose, because within her “the cultural clash has a happy ending”. Even within a process of cultural transmission characterized by discontinuity and negative and conflict-ridden family relationships, forms of cultural composition and negotiation can occur (cf. Zeroulou, 1985).

*Sometimes I wonder how I would have been, if I had not flown to Italy... would I be the same girl I am today? Surely immigration has had an effect on my way of thinking, it has become a Westernized way of thinking. According to my parents, this is a negative thing, but for me it is not like that, for me it is a very good thing. Although there are many Italians who still say: “Go back to your country!”, I would like to answer “No, I want to stay here. This is my country”. I am so attached to my country of birth, Morocco, a wonderful land, full of culture, full of beautiful places, full of people, full of love, I consider myself a full-fledged Moroccan girl, even if I am Italian. I consider myself a full-fledged Italian girl, even though I am Moroccan. I am the clash between cultural differences that ended in a positive and happy way: I am grateful for this wonderful opportunity.*

### *Concluding Remarks*

The autobiographies of Amna, Ikram, and Sole are only three cases of several successful paths undertaken by immigrant girls within the Italian

educational system. However, they are quite representative of second-generations' trajectories, of girls who have engaged in a process of upward mobility thanks to an individual and family investment on education. The three girls, independently from their migratory path, are committed in this process of improvement, distancing themselves from their parents' low socio-economic status and low cultural capital, through courageous choices of long-term and demanding studies, in upper secondary school when it is possible, or postponing their ambition for the future.

The autobiographical narratives of these three girls offer a complex picture of the pathways towards educational success and upward mobility. This common goal is pursued by different modes of negotiation of values, norms, and behaviors, in which traditional or modern ways of life cannot be analyzed as a simplistic or binary dichotomy, as other research has pointed out (Al-Rebholz, 2013).

Rather, educational success and social mobility coexist with different strategies among both students and parents: in the intergenerational transmission, cultural continuity and the maintenance of religious affiliation (as in the case of Amna) or cultural and religious decline and discontinuity, Westernization and secularization (see the story of Sole), or even uncertainty and indecision in religious practice (cf., Ikram) can be compatible with structural and educational integration (as highlighted in Santagati, Argentin, Colombo, 2019). Moreover, successful students are girls with different family experiences: some are like Amna, they come from a supportive family, a good and safe place, a family-refuge of respect and love. But experiences of educational success also characterize Sole's biography, who has more limited and conflictual relations with her parents, and finds her refuge in school and teachers.

The educational paths of the three students are grounded in family, social, and personal experiences in progress, composed by different elements combined in a more or less harmonic way, within their changing and uncertain identities, and within family relationships, which can be more or less positive. To understand these mechanisms that reshape and redefine values, identities, and relations, from one generation to another, it is important to continue studying and collecting biographical documents and stories of families. Through the biographical approach, it will be possible to analyze even more in-depth the intersection of cultural origins and social structure (Anthias, 2011), taking into consideration the double

nature of the intergenerational transmission, a process concerning culture, signs and meanings, and also the dynamics that contribute to placing individuals in the social hierarchy.

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