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To work or not to work? Immigrant women and work between constraints and opportunities: a comparison between Lombardy and Cataluña

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AQ1,

The aim of this article is to analyse how family constraints, in term of gender roles and child-care responsibilities, affect the behaviour and attitudes of immigrant women towards work, comparing Italy (Lombardy) and Spain (Barcelona). Moreover, personal skills, the economic crisis, and the limited job opportunities for migrants (who access mostly low-qualified jobs) also play a role in the employment status of immigrant women. Therefore, we are interested in understanding the reasons that make women decide to work (or seek a job) or not, and how they feel about their work or their unemployed status. We will analyse 72 interviews (47 in Italy and 25 in Spain) with working and non-working women of different nationalities, taking into account years of staying in the hosting country, family composition, level of education, and kind of job, in order to combine these different aspects with the attitudes and outcomes towards work.

AQ2,

Keywords: immigrant women; work; job satisfaction; family; gender roles

1. Introduction

The role and position of immigrant women in the receiving society and in the job market have often been conceived, especially in recent years, as functional to the increased working participation of native women and their need to reallocate family responsibilities (Anderson 2000, Lutz 2008, Erel 2012, Ambrosini 2013). This quite recent awareness has generated a number of studies and has balanced the scarce attention that until the 1980s had been given to female migration, due to the fact that this phenomenon was mainly considered a consequence of family reunification (Morokvasic 1984). Nowadays, women that migrate alone attracted by job opportunities mainly in the care and domestic services represent a female immigration flux as important as the one due to family reunification, even if the nationalities involved in these two paths might be quite different (Gil Araujo 2010, Bonizzoni 2014b). The difference in the typology and nationality of migrants, together with changing mix of welfare regimes, might contribute to explaining why in some European countries the employment rate of immigrant women is lower than that of the natives (MacPherson and Stewart 1989, Bevelander 2005), while in others it is the contrary (Raijman and Semyonov 1997, Rubin *et al.* 2008).

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The aim of this article is to analyse how family constraints, in term of gender roles and child care responsibilities, affect the behaviour and attitudes of immigrant women towards work, comparing Italy (Lombardy) and Spain (Barcelona). Moreover, personal skills, the economic crisis, and the limited job opportunities for migrants (who access mostly low-qualified jobs) also play a role in the employment status of immigrant women. Our first hypothesis is that nationality, gender roles, family constraints, and migration path influence the willingness to participate in the job market. AQ3

However, we are also interested in analysing the different meanings that the interviewed immigrant women attach to their work, if they stress more the importance of issues not directly connected to the job content (for example, earning money and contributing to the family income or avoiding being bored at home) or if they emphasize more the relevance of aspects strictly connected to the job they perform (for example, self-fulfilment). Our second hypothesis is that it is mostly women with regular jobs that consider their work as self-fulfilling, while non-working or occasionally working women focus more on economic or relational aspects.

2. To work or not to work: family responsibilities and gender contract

Women migrate for two main reasons, namely economic or family reasons (Thadani and Todaro 1984). In the first case, it is more likely that women participate in the labour market, while in the second case, their willingness to work is probably lower (Ballarino and Panichella 2012). AQ4

In general, while in ‘old receiving’ countries migrant women tend to participate less in the job market, especially in the first years of residence in the hosting country, in ‘new receiving countries’ (as both Italy and Spain are considered) they have more or less the same level of participation as native women (Rubin *et al.* 2008). However, the study by Rubin and co-workers emphasizes also that AQ5

potential problems of access of migrant women to the benefits of work-family reconciliation policies and programmes are suggested by of EU LFS findings of much lower employment rates of migrant women than native-born women with children less than 5 years old (Rubin *et al.* 2008, p. xxiii) AQ6

If the care of young children represents a strong limit to employment for migrant women in Europe, this might be even more evident in Italy and Spain, where family-work reconciliation solutions are overall limited and often expensive (Gil Araujo 2010) and reconciliation is somehow problematic also for native women (Moreno Mínguez 2012), who often rely on grandparents and other relatives, a network resource that is generally not available to immigrant women.

As we will see, the cost of these services is one of the reasons that make migrant women interviewed in Italy decide to stay at home taking care of their children instead of going to work and using day-care services. This decision is also consistent with the fact that migrant women have mainly access to low-paid, low-qualified jobs (Morokvasic 1984, Kofman 1999, Rubin *et al.* 2008, Ambrosini 2012a, 2013) that are generally concentrated in two sectors: sales and service occupations, and personal services (Rubin *et al.* 2008). Especially the domestic sector is often characterized by informal work (Lutz 2008, Ambrosini 2012a, Boccagni and Ambrosini 2012). Although this often means bad working conditions and low protection (Rubin *et al.* 2008), hourly domestic work might AQ7

guarantee to migrant women the necessary flexibility to reconcile work and family more than factory work or sales jobs (Bonizzoni 2014b).

In the management of both work and family migrant women rarely receive the help of their husbands, because mothers are the ones that are still generally expected to be responsible for child-care. However, the availability of the husband's income might allow women to work for fewer hours (Bonizzoni 2014a). The presence and the income of the husband, together with the existence of a wider network of relatives and compatriots that enforce specific norms and values, may influence the possibility of changing the existing 'gender contract'¹ (Forsberg 1998, Giele 2006, Bonizzoni 2014a) when seen together with changes in policies and welfare programmes that improve work–family reconciliation (Giele 2006). Moreover, the gender contract may vary in different local contexts (Forsberg 1998), adapting to the different structure of the job market and the available opportunities for men and women.

In the migration context, women may change their attitude towards work compared to the situation they were experiencing in their native country. In general, however, the decision whether to work or not might be linked more to economic and practical reasons than to cultural ones. To explore this issue, we have considered in our study women from different origins, dividing them in four groups: women from the Indian subcontinent, North Africans, South Americans, and Romanians. These groups include the largest groups of immigrants both in Italy and Spain and are characterized by different migration patterns, rates of female labour force participation in the home country, and periods of arrival in the two countries. In fact, North Africans (Moroccans and Egyptians) have a low participation rate, most women come through family reunification, and they were among the first immigrants both in Italy and Spain, while all the other groups arrived mostly in the last 20–25 years. Women from the Indian subcontinent (Bangladeshis and Pakistanis) are similar to North Africans, except that their migration is more recent. South American women (Uruguay, Ecuador, Chile, Colombia, Argentina) often are first migrants, and they have a very high participation rate. Finally, Romanians have also a high participation rate, while their migration pattern is more balanced between family reunification and migration alone (for further details, see section 4).²

3. Work: satisfaction and aspirations within family constraints

Work has always been considered a crucial component of personal identity (Depolo and Sarchielli 1987, Chiesi 1997), because it is often through his/her job that a person becomes socially recognized. However, it is important to bear in mind that job satisfaction is composed by different dimensions and that the importance given to each of these dimensions, and the overall job satisfaction, may vary according to personal characteristics (Kalleberg 1977, Sennett 2006, Hofmans *et al.* 2013).

For example, migration has a positive effect on job satisfaction, generating improved levels of satisfaction with work (De Jong *et al.* 2002). Other authors find a connection between job satisfaction and a positive relation with native co-workers and with the employer (Wang and Sangalang 2005). Sennett (2006) argues that immigrants attach more importance to job stability; they are also willing to accept a less-well-paid job if the status attributed to it is higher.

As the target of our research are immigrant women, we can, drawing on all these different theoretical and empirical contributions, take into account these relevant dimensions of job satisfaction and, more generally, of quality of work: (1) working

conditions (safe work environment, presence of a regular contract); (2) working hours and balancing work and non-working life; (3) income; (4) relations with co-workers and employer; (5) career opportunities; (6) self-fulfilment. Overall, however, job satisfaction of immigrants has not been very often considered, probably due to the awareness that immigrants are often employed in what are defined '3D' jobs (dirty, dangerous, and demanding), and their main element of satisfaction is linked to the improved economic conditions. In fact, variation in work values and, thus, in the assessment of one's own job satisfaction, are considered to be influenced by socialization and life experience, non-work social roles and previous work experiences (Kalleberg 1977). Thus, in case of difficult socio-economic conditions, such as in the presence of a generally high level of unemployment, people are ready to accept working conditions previously regarded as demeaning (Jahoda *et al.* 1986). This might be the case for immigrants, especially the ones that have migrated for economic reasons. Researches that deal with the job quality of migrants focus on their chances of upward mobility (Bean *et al.* 2004), while their well-being is not connected to the job they perform but to a future return to their home country (Piore 1979) or to the conditions of their loved ones (Boccagni and Ambrosini 2012).

It is often believed that immigrants, in order to improve their working conditions and to have any chance of career, need to turn to self-employment (Oso 2010, Ambrosini 2012b). In fact, the blocked mobility theory (for example, Rajjman and Tienda 2000) suggests that self-employment for immigrants represents a valid alternative to the underemployment or to lack of career opportunities. In self-employment, immigrants often run businesses that require low skills and long working hours, such as small shops, or become small carriers or self-employed in construction. However, if self-employment may secure a satisfying income and more career opportunities, after a few years entrepreneurs can suffer from status loss and from the long working hours (Pyong 1990). Focusing on women, they start a business as a result of a combination of their concentration in low-paying, full-time occupations and the inability to meet the demands of child-care, but also because they want independence and autonomy (Garcia 1995, Harvey 2005), widen their social networks and keep alive their cultural traditions (Dallalfar 1994), and have more creative and highly skilled jobs (Lunghi 2003).

We are fully aware that better (high-paid, high-skilled) jobs may account for not only a higher level of satisfaction, but also for satisfaction on more dimensions among the ones previously considered. But it might be possible that women that have the same kind of job express different motivations and satisfaction for different aspects, as well as women who look for a job attach different meanings to it and orient their search consequently.

4. Data and methods

In our research we compared two different contexts (the wider metropolitan areas of Barcelona and Milano) with a qualitative study that combined interviews with open-ended questions and questionnaires.³ The two areas have been chosen for their high concentration and long-lasting (considering that Southern European countries quite recently became receiving countries) presence of immigrants. The main questions were about social background, migration path, job career, social and associational networks, significance given to work, and strategies to reconcile work and family. Interviewees have been found through the personal network of the researchers, associations, churches, cultural mediators, and the snowball method. All the interviews were in Italian or

Spanish, except for the interviews with Bangladeshis that were translated by a cultural mediator. Most interviews were tape-recorded, except when interviewees said they felt more at ease without being recorded. The hypothesis presented in the introduction guided our analysis of the empirical material and led us to the construction of the typology presented in the next paragraphs, that was clearly defined only after the analysis, when differences among the interviewed women emerged more clearly.

As we said in section 2, our 72 interviewees come from four areas of origin: 27 come from the Indian subcontinent, 20 from Romania,⁴ 15 from North Africa, and 10 are South Americans. All women but five are married, and all of them but four have children. The overall average age is 36; 34 women have been living in the hosting country for more than 10 years, the rest for less. All the interviewed women have a regular residence status.

The level of education is in general quite high. Only one woman has no education, six women have studied up to 8 years, six women have studied for 10 years, 36 women have studied up to 12 years, and 25 reached university level. Education is the only personal characteristic where we find some differences between the Italian and the Spanish sample, because the level of education in the first group is higher than in the second one: of the 25 women with university education, 21 were living in the Milan area.

Twelve of the women came alone and, when married, met their husband in the hosting country although the husbands are also foreigners. The rest were already married when they came. Some women married a husband who was already living in the hosting country, others decided with their husband to start the project of migration from their native country.

5. Working situation, personal characteristics, and family constraints

As the working situation and the attitude towards work of the interviewed women are very different, for both non-working and working women, we have created a typology that takes into account attitudes, constraints, and the meaning attributed to work. Before dealing with it, however, we would like to discuss briefly the impact of the economic crisis and of some personal characteristics on the propensity to work or not.

Until 2007 the prosperity of the Spanish and Italian economies allowed social ascent opportunities to immigrants due to a growing labour market and the necessity of unqualified labour (Pajares 2009). After the economic crisis that situation changed dramatically. The consequent job destruction, especially in the construction industry, with mostly male labour, has as seen a trade-off in the rise of other unskilled jobs that involved more feminine presence (OECD 2012, Fullin and Reyneri 2013).

Years of education do not appear to be different among the women who work and the ones who do not. The working women are aged on average 39 years, the non-working 34 years. Similarly, working women have lived in the hosting country for 14 years on average, non-working women only for eight years on average.

Regarding the migration path, nine out of 12 women who came alone work, while one has a young child and two have lost their job. There might be a higher willingness to work among women who migrate alone, but this is not possible to say with our data, because of the influence of nationality.

In fact, nationality and age of children seem to be the most important aspects that account for the likelihood of working, with combined effects (Table 1).

South American and Romanian women are the ones that more often work, and their working status is only marginally affected by the presence of young children (even if

Table 1. Working status by nationality and age of younger child ($N = 72$).

		Working	Non-working
North Africa	Child <3 years	0	6
	No child <3 years	5	4
Indian subcontinent	Child <3 years	0	7
	No child <3 years	4	14
South America	Child <3 years	1	1
	No child <3 years	6	5
Romania	Child <3 years	3	3
	No child <3 years	12	2

AQ12

among South Americans only two have a young child). Among the North Africans, there is a majority of non- working women, and the ones who work all have children over three years. This tendency is even more evident among women from the Indian subcontinent. Only a small minority of them work, and none has young children.

Child-care duties seem to be a concrete limitation to the propensity to work especially for those nationalities where female participation in the labour force is less frequent. In the next section, we will explore more closely how family constraints – not only child-care, but also gender roles – affect the opinions and aspirations of non-working women towards work.

6. The non-working women

Keeping in mind that nationality and presence of young children are the main relevant characteristics that account for the different propensities to work, we distinguish the non-working women (38 women) in three groups: the ones who do not want or are not allowed to work (the *'happy' non-workers*), the ones who would like to work but have problems finding a job (the *weak seekers*), and the ones who would like to work but do not manage to reconcile work and family (the *family-constrained*).

In the first group, the *'happy' non-workers*, there are six Bangladeshi women from Milan, and two Moroccans and two Pakistanis from Barcelona. Three say that they do not want to work now and that they are not interested in finding a job even in the future. One says she is not interested in working but then admits that her husband does not want her to work. Four women declare immediately that their husbands do not want them to work. One of them explains: 'He doesn't want that I make efforts, let's say that. We have such a culture ...' (BAN_MI2). Another woman has worked before but now her situation is changed, both for economic and family reasons: 'Yes I have worked before but not now, there is not work, my husband doesn't want me to work' (MOR_BAR6). Two other women in this group say that they have tried to find a job (one of the two has even worked for 20 days), but they had difficulties in finding a job and now they got tired and do not want to work anymore. They are the so-called 'discouraged workers' (Ritzer 2013). In this group, apart from the nationalities, there are no differences among the Italian and the Spanish interviews. The cultural distance between the interviewees and the researchers (both natives), despite the occasional presence of a cultural mediator, prevents a clear understanding of the extent to which the non-working situation is considered really positively or only accepted as part of a traditional gender role.

255 The second group, the *weak seekers*, is composed of two subtypes, the ones who have never worked before and the ones who have been working at some time. In the Italian sample, five women (one Romanian, four Bangladeshi) are looking for a job, but only the Romanian has worked before. There are different reasons for this situation of unemployment: one is the persistent economic crisis that has made the Romanian lose her job and makes it harder for her to find a new one. Another reason concerns the constraints – excluding child-care – that restrict the possibilities of finding a job. One of these constraints might be the lack of a driving licence or living in an area poorly connected by public transportation. Another reason might be the lack of Italian language skills. One Bangladeshi has both these problems, so she would like to have any job near home. Another Bangladeshi woman, on the contrary, is looking for a very specific job, kitchen hand in restaurants because her husband works in a restaurant. She is looking for a job because she has no children and she gets bored at home. Apart for the specific motivations and the different constraints that the weak seekers have to face, what they have in common is their quite instrumental view of work: either they want to work to improve their economic or legal situation or because they get bored at home.

270 In the Spanish sample, there are eight women who although never having worked since they arrived in Spain are now looking for a job. Some of them have been searching for years; in the words of one of them: ‘I have looked continuously but it never came out. I would be really happy if I could find a job as it would mean an improvement to the family economy and I could also interact with more people and socialize’ (M8). Other women started to search more recently, as they state: ‘I have looked for a job because of the crisis, to earn money’ (P5). In the last case, it might be intuited that a slight change of roles is reflected in the number of women who have never worked before but are now seeking for a job. It seems that when the husband was first settled in Spain, coming on his own and marrying later or being the first one of the family to come, women were not expected to look for a job. However, the economic crisis and the needs of growing children might have forced some women to enter in the job market. As one woman says: ‘I thought this was going to be like the American dream and then I realized that no’ (M9). The subtype of women who have been working at some time is composed of five women, who keep on searching and are willing to work. They are three Moroccans, one Pakistani and one South American. One of them says: ‘I have worked since I arrived, but now there is no work’ (M5). She had worked from the year 2000 to 2008, when she had her second child. Even if none of these women talks about child-care constraints, three out of five women have children of less than three years, and this might limit their range of job opportunities. However, as Muñoz Comet (2012) points out, according to different studies during the negative stages of the economic cycle, foreign workers are one of the groups more sensitive to the loss of work.

285 The meaning they attribute to work is mostly economic, to improve the family income. It has to do with their concerns to overcome their financial critical situation, aggravated by the increased cost of water, electricity, and gas as well as the cutbacks on grants like school meals covered previously by the government. Other considerations such as job satisfaction or personal/self-fulfilment are considered by the ones that worked before: ‘Besides being an economic question, it is personal fulfilment, it makes you feel useful’ (M4).

300 What remains displaced to a second place are the relational or social aspects of work. This could reflect the fact that the kind of work they are doing, like house-cleaning or caregiving, is far from contributing to a social life. However, some of the groups, such as

Moroccans, have already their own community to satisfy this aspect. Nevertheless, curiously among the ones who mention the importance of the social aspect when considering the job, three are Moroccan and two of them have never worked, which could suggest some idealization. Another person, a Pakistani, mentions work as a way 'not to spend so much time in the house' (P3).

Ten women, one South American (from the Spanish sample), three Romanians and six Bangladeshis (from the Italian sample), compose the third group – the *family-constrained*. All of them have in common the fact that they do not work because they take care of their children and plan to work when the children are older. However, some of them consider this as their free choice, possible also thanks to the good income of the husband, while others live it more as a situation they have to withstand because they have no help in taking care of their children. The first case occurs especially to mothers with children less than three years old (this is the case of the South American and of two Romanians). On the contrary, others – who have children more than three years old – admit they would go to work immediately if they could find somebody to help them with the children. Others have experienced motherhood and the constraints that it poses on working possibilities in a more conflicting way, as a house-cleaner shows:

I could not work well with her [her child] ... I was very upset at the time, so I wanted to do my job, to keep a perfect order and with the baby ... I continuously scold her ... I could not ... she was small ... just before leaving she pulled down the entire library. (ROM_PV3)

Moreover, most women are fully aware that they will have to find a job that is compatible with school hours and that this means they will have not only to find a different job than the one they were performing (when they did) before maternity, but also that the range to choose from is quite narrow. Working in a supermarket is quoted by two women because it can be a part-time job and easy to fit in with the children's timetable. House-cleaning or baby-sitting are other possibilities, because they allow – or at least the interviewees suppose so – more flexibility. One woman has followed a course to open a day-care in her house so that she can work but also stay with her own child, even when she is ill.

Even if the motivation, the economic situation, and the previous working experience of these women are very different, what they have in common is that they are generally quite flexible on the kind of job they are looking for, because they know it has to match child-care needs. Moreover, in all but one case, they do not even hope to find a job similar to the one they have studied for or they had in their home country, whether they liked it or not. This is not always the case – luckily – of the working women.

7. The working women

Also the 34 working women can be divided in three groups: the ones that do not have a full-time job or not even a regular one (*occasional workers*), the ones that have a full-time – and sometimes even skilled – job (*fully participant workers*), and the ones that are self-employed or freelance (*independent workers*).

In the Italian sample, just like the family-constrained group among the non-workers, the eight *occasional workers* (six Romanians and two Bangladeshis) are heavily constrained by family needs and especially child-care timing. These women often share the regret for a lost regular job. The preference for an irregular, yet flexible, job – generally as domestic cleaner – is only limited to the time being, while projects for the

345 future include factory work, nursing or social work, seamstress – that is, more regular and possibly skilled jobs. For most of these women, work is an economic need, the way to improve family income. However, three women emphasize positively the possibility to go out of the house and meet people.

350 Seven women (six Romanians and one Bangladeshi) compose the group of the *fully participant workers*. One of them is the only interviewed woman who manages to work as a house-cleaner full time (40 hours per week) and with regular contracts. Three of the other women work as waitresses/kitchen helpers in restaurants. Even if the jobs of these four women might be considered less qualified than the jobs of the three other women in this group, from their words it is possible to understand how much they care about their job:

[Work] is very important. Vital, I would say [...] I have always liked to work. And also now I consider it very very important. Not only to have a job, not only for a living, but also for yourself. Because your mind is busy, you are active. (ROM_MB2)

360 [Work] is important for me [...] for a personal fulfilment, but also because at home I feel bad, doing always the same things and not seeing anybody. (ROM_PV1)

Even if these aspects – being active, seeing people – were already present in the previous group, here they gain importance over the economic sphere and, in general, women spend more time during the interview talking about their job, the relation with their employer and their colleagues (if present), which are generally positive and friendly. On the contrary, women in the first group have more formal relations with the employer, maybe due to the occasional nature of the job. They talk only about job content – ‘what is necessary’ (ROM_MI7) – but they do not do small talk, nor do they ask for help if they need something.

370 These aspects are even more evident in the three other women of the group, who perform jobs that are more qualified: a nurse, a dressmaker, and a cultural mediator. One says, when asked what work means to her:

375 Everything. I have said, and who wants to believe believes it, I don’t work for money, I work for my passion, I put my soul in my work [...] I have done this school [the nursing school] for three years and, when I finished it, I said: ‘Yes, this is my vocation that I have to do in this life’. (ROM_MI4)

About child-care, the seven women in this group have fewer problems in reconciling family and work, either because their children are older or because the husband, some relatives, friends, or a paid person help them:

380 With him we have an Italian woman that we pay. She helps us a lot [...] When he comes home from school I’m at home because I work in the morning or, vice versa, if I work in the afternoon I bring him in the morning, she takes him, stays with him an hour or two maximum because then my husband arrives. At 5–6 he arrives. (ROM_MI4)

Thanks to these helpers, they have managed to dedicate energy and time to the professional career.

385 Twelve women of different nationalities compose the last group, the *independent workers*. Ten of them are self-employed or shop owners. One has founded a cultural centre, library, and publishing house to promote her national culture; she has also written

two books. The last woman is a freelance journalist for her national television, a cultural mediator, and the vice-president of a cultural association. The economic aspect, when mentioned, is definitely of minor importance:

[Work] is important because a person has to be open about what she thinks that it is very important for her to let others know. I do not know if it's suitable, but I'm sure everyone feels the need to do something that he or she thinks to be good at. (ROM_MB1)

Q. What does work mean to you?

A. Be committed, have a job to do, to put all your heart into, because if I do a job I have to do well, if not I do not make it [...] ... and I say that every woman should not be a housewife. She should try to do something to feel good, to feel free, to feel proud of herself. Because sometimes we do not work only for money. (ROM_MI5)

These women also emphasize the opportunity they had to continue the career they had in their country of origin, or to do something similar, or to turn a passion they have always had into an entrepreneurial opportunity. However, the independent workers are more heterogeneous as far as their motivation, aspiration, and work meanings are concerned. Some business activities are at a medium-low level of skills, and even if the owners are proud of what they have achieved, economic and practical motivations are prevalent, and self-employment is not fully considered a free choice. In fact, they have started their activity for family reasons, or because they could not find another job.

Even if family and child-care has represented a motivation for some (IMP_M5: 'My daughter can stay in my travel agency after school, while before it was not possible'), in general the independent workers have felt less the burden of child-care. Three of them have no children. Most of them have grown-up children (they are on average older than the other women), and the others can rely on relatives or paid helpers.

Although only seven women of the Spanish sample work, we can identify two groups: the *occasional workers*, not full time or regular job, and the *fully participant workers*.

In the first group there are four women. Three of them work in the domestic service (one Moroccan and two South Americans). The fourth is a Pakistani woman who works part time as a mediator. There are only three *fully participant* workers, one Moroccan and two South Americans. One woman works in a museum and is the only one to have a job according to her education. For them the meaning of the job is highly important:

Really important, for my personal development as well as for the money. (SA1)

I like to work, I am not the kind that stays at home, I work hard and a lot but I feel so great personally. I have a ~~mental clearance~~ and relaxation because I have an income and don't have to worry about looking for a job. (M2)

AQ13

When considering the migrant women who have had access to the labour market at some time in Spain, in this study it emerges that their jobs belong mostly to the lower occupational structure and are characterized as being temporary, low-skilled, and with few possibilities of promotion. The sectors are domestic service and care work, hospitality, and retail business. Their years of study range from eight to more than 12. It is quite elevated considering the kinds of job they fulfil. All the women who had worked previously in their native countries, except one, found a job at some point, and it was less qualified and worse paid. None of them complains about it because in the current situation in Spain this is common, also for natives.

Another aspect to consider is the group of women who came alone and married later. This is the case of seven women: four Moroccans and three South Americans. All of them happen to be part of the group that has had work at some time in Spain and also has been here for more than 10 years now. This might suggest that either their previous experience during the years of permanence, or their autonomy, or other personal qualities that favoured their independent migration path, make a difference in the access to a job.

The topic of children has not been an impediment when accessing the labour market. They have found options like working while the children are at school, 'I have an intensive schedule; that way I can take care of the children after school' (SA1). They have leant on their family and social network, or they have paid another woman to take care of them. Some say that their friends and neighbours have helped them, others are more specific: 'My father takes care of the child' (SA4), 'Before when I worked I paid somebody to take care of the children' (M3). Only one woman decides not to work in order to be with her child. In some cases the husband has been the one to undertake this care, pointing to a change of traditional roles. She says smiling, 'Now that I work he takes care of the children, goes for groceries, cooks them dinner. And now he knows how much I did' (M2).

8. Final remarks

As supposed in our first hypothesis, nationality, gender roles, and family constraints play a role in the working situation of the interviewed women both in Milan and in Barcelona. In both samples, some husbands do not want their wives to work. This happens especially in families from the Indian subcontinent. However, in both countries and in all nationalities there are exceptions to this situation, opening the way to a redefinition of the gender contract that in some cases goes to the situation of the husband taking care of the children while the wife works. Mainly, these shifting roles are driven by economic needs.

Secondarily, the presence of young children influences not only the working status, but the kind of job women manage to perform. This is more evident in the Italian case. In fact, it is especially surprising that none of the job seekers in Barcelona belongs to the family-constrained type, except one that definitely considers staying at home with her baby as a free choice. On the contrary, in Italy both among the family-constrained and among the occasional workers, child-care represents a strong constraint that is often pointed out and stressed by the interviewees. There might be different explanations for this difference. First, even if in both countries some women have lost their job and have difficulties in finding a new one, the economic crisis might have affected more heavily the immigrant women in Barcelona. Therefore the difficulties in finding a job might be considered harder to solve than child-caring. Also the social networks of some women, namely the Moroccans, might be wider and with more non-working relatives ready to help than the networks of the Romanians. In the latter group, networks are most geographically dispersed, most women work, and it is more difficult to find continuous help and solidarity (Ambrosini and Bonizzoni 2012).

About the meanings attributed to work, there is a common finding in both countries. Setting aside the level of skills, when the job is more regular, the importance given to non-economic aspects grows. This is particularly evident in the Italian case, where the higher number of interviews and the wider range of occupations analysed allow us to distinguish the need for going out of the house and seeing people (main non-economic

motivation given by non-working women) from the focus on career improvement (e.g. the project of most occasional workers about finding a more regular job when the children are older). Regular workers give more attention to good relations with the employer and colleagues than awkward workers do, while skilled regular workers and independent workers emphasize self-fulfilment. AQ15

However, self-fulfilment is not always linked to self-employment, which is often considered by scholars the main career opportunity for immigrants. In fact, in our sample, skilled regular workers show the same level of satisfaction and passion for their job as most of the self-employed. On the contrary, among the self-employed, there are some that have chosen this working path for lack of alternatives or for practical reasons (often connected to their family needs), and, even if they are not unsatisfied, they show less involvement and interest in continuing their activity in the future.

Therefore, family constraints seem to influence the working status of women at different levels: first, in the willingness to enter in the job market, secondly, in the chances to find a job that complies with the children's needs and timing, and, last but not least, in the decision to start one's own business to have greater flexibility in dealing with children, due to the possibility of mixing the working and family space.

Notes

1. Gender contracts concern the distribution of paid and non-paid work among family members.
2. Women's labour force participation rate: Egypt 23.2%, Morocco 25.9%, Bangladesh 36%, Pakistan 21.5%, South Americans not less than 42.5%, Romanians 46.9%; Italy: 38.2%, Spain 51.7% (Source: ILO, 2010). AQ16
3. In the Italian context, eight interviews were carried out in 2010, 39 in 2012. In the Spanish context, 25 interviews were carried out in 2013.
4. Unfortunately, no Romanian has been interviewed in Barcelona. All the other groups are present both in Milan and in Barcelona. AQ17

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