

INTERCULTURAL FEMINIST PRACTICES IN ITALY: CHALLENGING STEREOTYPED AND OTHERING IMAGES OF MIGRANT WOMEN

Erika Bernacchi¹

Abstract: Feminist postcolonial authors criticised the tendency of mainstream western feminism to represent 'third world' women as necessarily less emancipated than western women and to describe their cultural practices in an othering way, without holding their own culture up to the same scrutiny. From this idea stems a paternalistic and patronising attitude that locates western women in a “position to liberate their less fortunate sisters, especially those in the 'Third World'”. (hooks, 2000: 45). In light of these reflections, this article investigates to what extent selected women's intercultural associations in Italy have been able to counter dominant discourses that see migrant women as necessarily needy and deprived or as a sign of cultural difference. The research confronts the associations' mission statements with the practices and relationships that emerged from the interviews. It focuses first on power sharing within the associations and the relevance of patronizing attitudes on the part of Italian-born women. Secondly the article explores how associations addressed the notion of cultural difference by focusing on the specific issues of Islamic veiling practices and female genital mutilations. Finally it investigates the possible value of cross-cultural comparisons on practices detrimental to women in the promotion of intercultural feminist practices.

Keywords: postcolonial feminism; migration, interculturalism, Islamic headscarf, FGM, Italy.

1. Introductory remarks

Postcolonial feminism has criticised the notion of global sisterhood, elaborated by second-wave feminism, stating that this notion was in reality premised only on the lives of white, western, middle class women, while not taking into account the racial discrimination suffered by third world, black and ethnic minority women, as well as the role played by white women in its perpetuation. (Mohanty, 1984, 2003; Spivak, 1993; Ang, 1995; hooks, 2000; Ahmed, 2000). Feminist postcolonial authors criticised the tendency of mainstream western feminism to represent third world women as a homogeneous category and as necessarily less emancipated than western women. (Mohanty, 1984). From

¹ Ph.D in women's studies, University College of Dublin and Ph.D in Education Sciences, Quality of Training, Development of knowledge and knowledge of differences, University of Florence. She cooperates with the University of Florence, Department of Education. E-mail: erika.bernacchi@gmail.com

this idea stems a paternalistic and patronising attitude that locates western women in a “position to liberate their less fortunate sisters, especially those in the 'Third World'”. (hooks, 2000: 45). Notwithstanding this critique, some feminist postcolonial scholars (Yuval Davis, 1997, 2006; Brah, 1996; Mohanty, 2003; Ahmed, 2000) have argued for the importance of building an alternative project based on a shared commitment to fight against racism and sexism among women who are positioned differently and unequally, mainly on the grounds of “race” and class.

In light of these reflections, this article investigates feminist intercultural practices carried out in the specific context of a selected number of women’s intercultural associations in Italy. In particular, it analyses the extent to which they have been able to counter prevailing images of migrant women as needy and deprived, or as a sign of cultural difference that has either been exoticised or is seen as irreconcilable with western values.

2. The Italian migration context

Before addressing these issues,

I will first set the framework of the Italian migration context and present the focus and methodology of the study.

In contrast to other European countries with long immigration histories, such as the UK and France, but similarly to other southern European countries, Italy has witnessed significant immigration in more recent times, starting from the early ‘90s. However, migration has taken place since the ‘70s, when specific groups of migrant women – mostly from the Philippines, Cape Verde, the Dominican Republic, Somalia, Eritrea, Sri Lanka and El Salvador – arrived in Italy to be employed as domestic workers in upper class families. During this period, migrant women remained largely invisible, as they were mostly employed as live-in domestics. During the ‘80s, women started to be employed in the daytime and no longer as live-in domestics, achieving a greater degree of independence and becoming more visible. During the ‘90s, a significant number of migrant women arrived in Italy for family reunification reasons, following new legislation on the matter. At the beginning of the new millennium, the phenomenon of migrant women employed as domestics and carers for the

elderly, mostly as live-in workers, became increasingly wide-spread. This situation has been described in the literature on this issue as a shift from the condition of *colf* to that of *badante*² – (Campani & Chiappelli, 2014), namely from being employed in upper class Italian families as domestic maids (*colf*) to being employed as carers for elderly people (*badante*) also by lower income families due to the absence of sufficient welfare measures.

The female percentage of total migration to Italy has always been relatively high (never less than 30% of the total); in recent years there has been a constant increase in the number and proportion of female migrants, who have indeed outnumbered male migrants since 2008. In 2014 they accounted for 52,7% of the total number of 4,922,085 regular migrants residing in Italy (equal to 8.1% of the total population).

Migrant women are still mostly

employed in low paid and low skilled sectors, in particular in domestic and care work, even when they are highly educated. Moreover, their situation has been described as a “frozen professional destiny” (Campani & Chiappelli, 2014) inasmuch as this is not a temporary occupation leading to more qualified jobs, but tends to become a permanent position. The large presence of women in migratory flows who migrate alone in order to be employed in the domestic and care work sector is regarded as a characteristic of the so-called Mediterranean model of migration³ (King, 2001). This is due to the care needs of the population, which are not sufficiently covered by the welfare system.

Concerning migrant women’s associations, if during the ‘80s they were initially founded on a national basis⁴, it was not until the mid ‘90s that women’s intercultural associations, composed of

²This term, which literally means “the one who looks after”, carries a derogatory connotation, which reflects a negative attitude both towards old people and migrants. The term has been criticised by migrant organisations but is commonly used.

³However, it must be noted that recent scholarship has questioned the presence of a homogenous southern European model of migration, arguing for the existence of important differences among southern European countries and significant similarities between the north and

south of Europe. (Anthias, *et al.* 2013)

⁴The most significant associations that were set up during the ‘80s are the Association of Women from Cape Verde, the Filipino Women’s Council and the Eritrean Women’s Association. Eastern women’s associations were first set up in the ‘90s, following migration flows from those countries. There are also confessional women’s associations such as ADMI, the Association of Muslim Women in Italy. For an in-depth analysis of migrant women’s associations in Italy see Pojman 2006.

both migrant and Italian-born women, were set up. Before that time, the relationship between migrant and Italian-born women associations proved rather difficult, since, as indicated by Pojmann (2006: 72): “Migrant women first viewed Italian women as privileged, while Italian women saw migrant women as somehow outside the realm of Italian feminism.”

Interestingly, the turning point that led to setting up joint associations was the UN Beijing Conference on Women in 1995. Ironically, it was at Beijing that some migrant women’s leaders first met with Italian feminists. Regarding the encounter between Italian-born and migrant women in common associations, Pojmann concludes that:

Migrant women’s associations in Italy have begun to work more closely with Italian feminist organizations on issues pertaining to globalisation and the development of an international women’s movement, but these relationships have yet to make a dramatic impact on the construction of theories and practices that effectively utilise the experiences of migrant women. (Pojmann, 2006: 162)

Based on these conclusions, my study analyses the extent to which these associations have been able to provide a space to build feminist intercultural

practices that avoid patronising and othering attitudes on the part of Italian-born women.

3. Focus and Methodology

This study is based on my Ph.D thesis in women’s studies on feminist intercultural practices in Italy (Bernacchi, 2014). It focuses on six women’s intercultural associations, namely *Almaterra* and *Almateatro* based in Turin, *Nosotras* and *Punto di partenza* in Florence, *Trama di Terre* in Imola and *Le Mafalde* in Prato. This type of association is best placed to study feminist intercultural practices because it brings together migrant and Italian-born women. The majority of these associations combine a range of services and activities to promote migrant women's rights. *Almaterra*, *Trama di terre* and *Nosotras* are regarded as the most well-known associations of this kind and were founded at the end of the ‘90s (Pojmann, 2006). *Almateatro* is a group dedicated to theatre activities that only recently separated from the larger *Almaterra*. In addition to these associations, the analysis includes *Punto di partenza*, an organisation that originated from the experience of *Nosotras*, but aimed to create a more

political project. Finally, *Le Mafalde* has only recently been established and is of interest here as it was created by a younger generation of women.

The methodology adopted combines in-depth interviews with women who are members of the associations with the use of a documentary analysis of the associations' texts and publications, and the scripts of performances in the case of *Almateatro*. I carried out 27 anonymous in-depth interviews with migrant (16) and Italian-born (11) women who hold specific roles within the associations – including the association's President, some founding members and women in charge of specific projects. I carried out interviews in Italian and subsequently translated the cited excerpts into English. In addition, fieldwork included participating in a number of seminars, events and informal gatherings organised by these associations over a one-and-a-half year period.

The migrant women I interviewed come mostly from Eastern Europe, Africa and South America. The majority have acquired Italian citizenship through long-term residence in Italy and/or having married an Italian national. The age of both the Italian-born

and migrant women interviewed varies widely, ranging from 26 to 70, and their level of education is generally high (the majority of women interviewed, both migrant and Italian-born, hold a degree). When citing excerpts from interviews, I have indicated whether it is an Italian-born woman (IBW) or a migrant woman (MW), as this is the most relevant characteristic to take into consideration for the purposes of this research. I have also indicated the continent or sub-continent of origin of migrant women, without indicating the specific country, in order to ensure the anonymity of the interviewees.

Moreover, where relevant, I have specified the name of the association of which the women are members. In other cases I have only referred to the women's testimonies when the focus of attention was on intercultural practices and dynamics and not on the experience of a specific organisation.

4. Opposing the image of migrant women as needy and deprived

In the light of the considerations provided by feminist postcolonial theory, in this section I investigate the extent to which associations have been able to

counter dominant discourses that see migrant women as necessarily needy, deprived and incompetent. I confront the narratives of the associations' mission statements with the practices and relationships that emerged from the interviews. From the analysis of the mission statements it appears that all the associations aim to contrast the prevailing image of migrant women, although emphasising different aspects. For instance, the overriding objective of *Almaterra* is to challenge the stereotype of immigrants as “people in need” and to value the competences of migrant women in order to create projects especially focused on women's self-determination as well as on income-generating activities. *Almateatro* aims to create a space in which to share ideas on the rights of migrants and “native” citizens, as well as to create a link between different and ever-changing cultures. *Nosotras* defines itself as “a group of women who are different on the basis of their country, age, political and cultural training, whose working methodology starts from their own personal experience” while *Le Mafalde* is “a group of Italian and immigrant women who believe in the value of diversity and the importance of every

single person to create moments of encounter and exchange”. Unlike other associations that refer to the concept of “difference”, *Punto di partenza* highlights asymmetries and inequalities among women, as well as between countries, and aims to promote a debate on these issues.

Furthermore, from the women’s testimonies, the issue of valuing migrant women’s competences emerged as key. Some women stated that the association provides a space where they feel equal, and this is seen as a precondition for working together. For instance, Ellen stated that: “What counts first is seeing ourselves as women; once we see ourselves as women and we talk about our body that is the same ... it does not have a nationality.” (Ellen, MW, Sub-saharian Africa)

Yvonne, when referring to their work, also underlined the need to go beyond any judgemental attitude based on ethnicity and nationality, and said:

As soon as we enter *Nosotras* we leave outside, not only the prejudices, but also any attempt to judge the other [...] We set those to zero. A Somali is equal to a Tunisian, she’s equal to an Italian, an English woman or French woman, to an Albanian or Romanian. I think that this is the basis that enables us to work together. It’s that nobody feels superior or inferior to others. From that point of view we are able to

work well. (Yvonne, MW, North-Africa)

On the contrary, in other cases migrant women have complained that their skills were not recognised and that they were always seen as living in a fragile situation. For instance, Gloria reported:

In fact, one of the claims when speaking about ‘native’ and migrant women was that it was hard to say “we do not talk about this division, we talk about women in general”. To speak of women in general means, in practice, to give the possibility to migrant women of being realised. There are a few problems with this. (Gloria, MW, South America)

In some circumstances this point was due to a prevailing patronising attitude on the part of Italian-born women and the lack of power sharing within the associations. Indeed, some migrant women refer to the tendency of Italian-born women, in particular those holding the highest positions in the associations, to see themselves only as mentors and guides towards migrant women. This attitude is felt as patronising and is regarded as an obstacle to the pursuit of equal relationships within the association. For instance, Bianca stated:

There has always been an issue about what foreign women need from Italian women and this has always created difficulties in the

relationship, in the sense that you can find a foreign woman with a cultural background, beyond the problem of language, which is, suffice to say, something we have all overcome ... Within relationships that could be either paternalistic something I cannot stand [...]” (Bianca, MW, South America)

Bianca, who was a professional before coming to Italy, described a situation in which migrant women are treated as unskilled workers merely because they are migrants, regardless of their background and employment history in their country of origin. The explanation given by another migrant woman on this point was very clear-cut: “In the West there is always the idea that those who are coming from another place here they must learn ... Absolutely you have nothing to learn as a native, you only have to teach, to give, that's what we feel [...]” (Patricia, MW, Eastern Europe)

Although she also added that if you ask Italian-born women they will tell you that they have learnt something, she believes that this only concerns minor issues. In relation to this point, whiteness studies have largely shown how being white functions as an invisible marker of privilege and the norm against which all other people are called to confront themselves (McIntosh, 1988, 1990;

Frankenberg, 1993a, 1993b).

Rich in particular refers to the concept of “white solipsism”, that she defines as:

[...] not the consciously held belief that one race is inherently superior to all the others, but a tunnel-vision which simply does not see non-white experience or existence as precious or significant, unless in spasmodic, impotent guilt-reflexes, which have little or no long-term, continuing momentum or political usefulness. (Rich, 1979: 306)

This aspect is also reflected in power sharing within the associations. In relation to this point, some associations have adopted so-called “positive discrimination” policies, based on the idea of promoting migrant women into leading positions, in particular as presidents of an association. While in some cases migrant women considered these policies useful and effective, in others they regarded them as mainly tokenistic, depending also on the specific history, role and size of each association.

For instance, a migrant woman stated that from her point of view the fact that she was appointed president of the association was particularly important for her: “In any case the fact that we have managed projects and we have created things, and the fact that if it went OK, it was fine and if it didn’t, they were there

to protect us, in some way created a dynamic of challenge and interaction, and this served us well in our journey through life.” (MW)

In this case the relationship with the more experienced Italian-born women is not felt to be patronising but protective and empowering. However, in other parts of the interview, she also emphasised that there was a problem in the sharing of knowledge within the association, as some of the Italian-born founding members were very reluctant to do this. This happened not only in relation to migrant women, but also towards younger Italian-born women. Another migrant woman was even more critical. She stated that the extent to which they, as migrant women, were allowed to hold relevant roles within the association was always decided by a group of Italian-born founding members.

Conversely Ada, an Italian-born woman, argued that the “positive discrimination” policy enacted by the association was successful, as it provided migrant women with the opportunity to acquire experience which they would not easily obtain in other circumstances and which they would then be able to use in other contexts. The association’s role in relation to training opportunities was

also acknowledged by some migrant women, even among those who have left the association. For instance, Isabel stated that: “I left the association and I did not know what would happen to me, but I found myself very strong, I found myself very capable and I found myself very well able to progress in my field.” (Isabel, MW, South America)

Even though Isabel reported leaving the association, she confirmed its empowering role in her case. This point is of key importance and reflects the association's mission statement which refers to women's self-determination and valuing the skills of migrant women.

In conclusion, the migrant women revealed different situations in their accounts: in some cases “positive discrimination” policies have been regarded as mainly tokenistic because they have not led to a real alteration of the power structure which continues to be shaped by Italian-born women. In other cases, the migrant women have had a real say in devising the association's policies, and this appears to contribute to the enactment of the associations' mission statements.

5. Migrant women as symbols of cultural difference?

In this second part of the article, I will explore the extent to which associations have been able to counter prevailing images of migrant women as a symbol of cultural difference either in an exoticising way or as a sign of irreconcilable difference with western values.

The issue of the representation of Third World women in western feminism is key in feminist postcolonial scholarship. As already recalled, a number of authors (Mohanty, 1984; Spivak, 1993; Ahmed, 2000) have argued that dominant discourse in western feminism tended to represent Third World women as necessarily less emancipated and to describe their different cultural practices in an othering way, without holding their own culture up to the same scrutiny.

Drawing on that scholarship, I have analysed how associations have addressed the notion of cultural difference – including the issue of visible signs of cultural difference (e.g. the Islamic headscarf) – and the extent to which they have been able to challenge the legacy of colonialism in terms of othering processes. In particular, I have focused here on two cultural practices

that are often taken to represent cultural difference, namely Islamic veiling practices and female genital mutilations (FGM).

5.1 Muslim veiled women as the embodiment of cultural difference?

The issue of the Islamic headscarf has been made to symbolise one of the most evident representation of cultural difference. Postcolonial scholars (Fanon, 1965; Yeğenoğlu, 1998; Lewis, 2004) have shown how the western obsession with the Islamic headscarf originated in the colonial period and that there is still a legacy of that obsession today, even in some feminist settings. In dominant discourses, veiled Muslim women are regarded as being at irreconcilable odds with western values, as the Islamic headscarf is taken as a symbol of women's submission and of the resistance to a process of

westernisation.⁵ In my research I asked about how the women's intercultural associations on which I focused in this research contribute to opposing or reinforcing such othering attitudes and the extent to which wearing a headscarf is a dividing line among women who are members of these associations. I also show how the issue of the Islamic headscarf also engendered a larger debate about constraints imposed on women across countries and cultures in the specific experience of *Almateatro*.

It is interesting to note that while all the associations support the idea of women's freedom to wear the Islamic headscarf and demand that they should not be discriminated against, women's personal opinions on the topic can vary significantly. At one end of the spectrum lie women who see the matter as a woman's personal choice. Ada for instance stated that in the early years of the association the issue of the headscarf

⁵When addressing the issue of Islamic veiling practices, it is important to recall that this subject is source of debate and division not only in Western countries, but also in Muslim countries. While in some Muslim countries the wearing of the veil is mandatory, in other countries it is prohibited in some settings, such as education and government. Different typologies of veil also exist ranging from the *hijab*, a scarf that covers the head and neck but leaves the face clear, to the *niqab*, which only leaves the area around the eyes clear, to the *burka*, which covers the entire face and body, leaving just a mesh screen to see through. As recalled by Lewis:

[...] the obsession with the veiled woman and with the local and international significance of visible Islamic practice is not confined to the West: the veil has reappeared (if it ever went away) both as a choice, newly energized by a generation of young women who reject the secular modernity

of many postcolonial states in the Muslim world, or worn as a badge of pride by women in diasporic communities, or adopted strategically to facilitate otherwise transgressive gender behaviours; and as an imposition, remodelled by Islamic revivalist forces reliant on their own nostalgic investment in narratives of an imagined prior golden moment of organic Islamic religiosity. (Lewis, 2004: 268)

While it is fundamental to bear this complexity in mind, the specific analysis of this study focuses on prevailing attitudes of Muslim veiled women in the Western context in the framework of selected women's intercultural associations.

was a constant source of debate, while now: “It has even become annoying to continue talking about it, so much so that when a journalist calls asking: ‘I want an interview with a veiled woman’ we answer ‘listen, here there are only women, we are not concerned with whether they wear a veil or not’, we are fed up with the subject [...]” (Ada, IBW). By answering “here there are only women”, Ada is countering othering processes put in place by journalists who objectify veiled women. Other accounts, however, seem to go in a different direction, as they interpret the headscarf as in opposition to being a feminist. This happens in particular on the part of young Italian-born women. For instance, Chiara, a young Italian-born woman, said: “This place is called a feminist place, but when they answer ‘I feel freer with the veil’, I say ‘OK, we don’t have much more to say to each other’[...]” (Chiara, IBW). Similarly, Flora, another young Italian-born woman, referring to a migrant woman added: “But F. is not a feminist, she is a veiled Muslim, I mean she doesn’t look like an emancipated feminist”. Sara, yet another young Italian-born woman, describes the headscarf as in opposition to women’s freedom. When referring to a woman

wearing “this long black tunic that covered everything but her feet and hands, and wearing an almost integral veil, which covered everything but the oval of her face” she showed great uneasiness and used the expressions “a mask of loneliness”, “really she was empty, there was nothing there”, “a world of cages”. Francesca, another young Italian-born woman, considers the headscarf to some extents as a barrier to friendship, and described the unveiling of a woman when they were together as “a demonstration of friendship and trust”.

In conclusion, while Ada’s account of the fact that they are tired of talking about the headscarf reveals that this is no longer considered a source of division among older Italian-born women within the association, it remains a contentious matter for younger Italian-born women.

The association *Almateatro* also promoted a broader debate on the issue with the performance entitled “Chador and other veils”. Interestingly, the issue of the Islamic headscarf was not analysed in its own right but was addressed as a starting point for a debate on women's various constraints. As emphasised by Bianca:

This was to investigate a bit the history of the veil, but not of the Muslim veil, rather of the veil that women have in all cultures; the relationship with the body, the relationship that cultures have with women's bodies, should they be covered, should they be uncovered, what can be seen and what can't, what can be done and what can't. (Bianca, MW, South America)

The performance analyses the issue of the headscarf as an indication of women's relationship with their body, a theme that is central across cultures. The headscarf is also investigated in terms of boundaries as an ordering principle or as something to overcome, as well as in relation to the occupation of external space. This perspective opens up the discourse and prompts a reflection that is not confined to Muslim women but is relevant to women regardless of their country of origin or cultural background.

When commenting on the performance, Bianca and Karin refer to the headscarf as a constraint, which is not however different from other kinds of constraints that women suffer in other circumstances. Bianca refers for instance to “the size 6 dictatorship” that western women have to confront, thus echoing Fatima Mernissi's observations in her novel “Scheherazade goes West” (2001). Karen declares: “A woman who is a model is not a free woman, she is a slave.

In the same way a woman in Afghanistan who wears the *burqa* is not free, she is a slave, for me there is no substantial difference both are not free [...]” (Karen, MW, Sub-saharian Africa)

In this account, Karen extends the comparison further by putting two apparently opposite situations, such as being a model and that of wearing a burqa, on the same level. Also, Karen's reasoning goes in the direction of establishing a more reciprocal situation between western and non-western women. However, the extent of women's freedom in choosing which behaviour to adopt is not explored.

To conclude on this point, this issue of Islamic veiling practices continues to be a source of debate within the associations in question, where different opinions on the part of Italian-born women emerge beyond the official policies promoted by the associations themselves. This analysis also emphasises how the most othering attitudes appear to be exhibited by young Italian-born women, thus indicating age as a significant factor in this specific area.

5.2 Opposing prevailing views on FGM through cross-cultural

**comparisons on harmful practices
against women**

The practice of FGM has also been taken to represent a symbol of cultural difference and of the subordinate status of women in some societies. Among the associations that have addressed this issue, it is interesting to note how *Almateatro* attempted to contrast those attitudes through a performance that promotes a cross-cultural comparison on practices that are detrimental to women. The performance “Who is the last one?” compares the practices of female genital mutilation with aesthetic vaginal surgery. The performance is part of a project opposing FGM and aimed at promoting awareness among the migrant population of the 2006 law forbidding FGM in Italy. However, the performance aims at promoting a general debate on societal norms that women have to conform to in different cultures in order to be accepted and respected. In the performance the two practices – FGM and aesthetic vaginal surgery – are discussed by Italian and African women who compare the reasons and social norms that bring women to carry them out, in relation to concepts of beauty, virtue and

femininity.

The issues addressed in the performance had been long discussed within *Almateatro* as well as in the larger association *Almaterra*. In particular, the debate centred around what are considered harmful practices against women, the possibility of finding some form of global consensus around these issues, and on the risks of slipping into a position of cultural relativism. In relation to such questions, Anna explained:

We had a discussion group among the women ... where we also discussed genital mutilation and there were some women, the feminists from '68 in fact, saying: “Oh no you mutilated, you have to stop with this practice”. So in that case there was a form of imposition without asking for the reasons for the practice. I mean it is not something that can be excused, but we need to understand the reasons because if you do not go to the roots [...] So I said, we western women are also psychologically maimed, ... and I raised the example of eating disorders, the perennial non-acceptance of one's body because it has to meet the image of Barbie ... and so on [...] (Anna, IBW)

In this testimony Anna then introduced a comparison between female genital mutilation and the fact that western women are “psychologically maimed” due to their obsession with their physical appearance. She added that this is proven by the prevalence of eating

disorders, particularly among young women. She then went on to explain how this comparison is made explicit in the performance “Who Is The Last One?” where:

The violence on the body of women, who suffer genital alterations compares to the suffering and violence that western women seem to suffer after voluntarily surgery ... “ah, but you can choose the surgery” ... “yes, of course you can choose the surgery, however, the fact is that a woman always feels inadequate ... so find a woman who does not say something like, “ah I would like to be like that” [...] yesterday I discovered that, in Italy, the leading cause of death among girls of between 12 and 25 is from eating disorders ... so that tells you everything. (Anna, IBW)

Anna questioned the idea that aesthetic surgery is the result of a free choice on the basis of the fact that almost all women feel inadequate about their physical appearance. Her implicit conclusion is that western culture leads to women not accepting their body, as it has to conform to impossible standards. Similarly, with regard to the comparison between FGM and aesthetic surgery, Karen said “we have physical mutilations and you have psychological mutilations” and she added:

Why do we have infibulation? It is because there is a culture that says a woman should not have sex before marriage. It is something to do with men, a woman must be beautiful; it is always something to do with men, anyway [...]

everything that you do is related to giving pleasure to men or pleasing the world or earning money from women. (Karen, MW, Sub-Saharan Africa)

As with the comparison between women models and women wearing the *burqa*, Karen remarked that social norms concerning women’s bodies, even if they take different forms, all share the common factor of deriving from men’s expectations or aiming to “earn money from women”. Karen underlined the fact that “women are not free” in different parts of the world and highlighted how all the different discriminatory practices are culture-based. She therefore refuses the notion of cultural practices only being referred to non-western practices, endorsing the point made by Phillips (2007) who notes with concern that the language of culture and cultural tradition is currently used almost exclusively with reference to minority non-western populations.

However, not all women members of the association shared this opinion. For instance Ada criticised the idea of comparing FGM and aesthetic surgery:

And then there was another thing that lasted for a while, mutual tolerance. “Oh well ... they get infibulated, we reshape our breasts”. [...] Intolerable, because if you reshape your breasts, a law is now being passed that you have

to be an adult, a stupid one, but an adult. Hopefully they are fully informed about their decision. A child, on the other hand, is not able to refuse.” (Ada, IBW)

According to Ada the comparison between different practices that are detrimental to women is not helpful in understanding each other’s forms of discrimination, but is just regarded as “mutual tolerance”. Ada defined such comparison as “intolerable”, and emphasised the voluntary nature of aesthetic surgery, as this is a choice made by adults, albeit “stupid adults”, whereas FGM is practised on children.

The operation carried out by *Almateatro* with the performance “Who is the last one?” appears to echo concerns expressed by feminist postcolonial authors who advocate precisely for the need to set a relative value on the different kinds of oppression that women face in different cultures. For instance, hooks (2000: 46-47) explicitly acknowledges the need to analyse how practices that involve women’s bodies are globally linked. In particular, she refers to linking FGM to life-threatening eating disorders or aesthetic surgery which derive from the imposition of cultural norms about thinness. Mendoza (2002) focuses on the issue of “who sets

the agenda” in international forums and underlines that it would be interesting to see if women from the South could raise issues concerning women from the North – such as anorexia or sexual objectification of women in the media – in the same way that women from the North talk about FGM or the Islamic headscarf.

These authors have often highlighted the need to establish similar comparisons in order to overcome the image of Third World women as necessarily less emancipated than their western counterparts, as well as to identify a number of practices that are detrimental to women and prevalent in the West but which are normally not considered as such, but simply the result of free choice. Ahmed (2000) also criticises any linear representation of a progress from a state of subordination to one of emancipation by western women, which Third World women are called to imitate. These comparisons can be regarded as useful when trying to avoid a position of what Anthias (2002) defines “feminist fundamentalism”.

In conclusion, it appears that the most important value of a cross-cultural comparison between different practices that are detrimental to women, such as

that operated by *Almateatro*, is a contribution towards not reproducing racist and imperialist views when addressing cultural practices such as FGM (hooks, 2000). It also contributes to stripping away the mask of “free will” that hides detrimental cultural practices towards women in western countries.

Concluding remarks

In the light of feminist postcolonial scholarship, this article has analysed the extent to which women’s intercultural associations considered in this study have been able to counter prevailing images of migrant women as necessarily needy and deprived on the one hand, and a sign of cultural difference on the other hand. Concerning the first aspect, this research uncovered a tension between the associations’ mission statements (based on the ideas of valuing difference and the competences of migrant women) and the actual practices carried out by the associations themselves. This is mainly due to the persistence, in some instances, of patronising attitudes on the part of Italian-born women that hinder the establishment of equal relationships among the women. Concerning the issue of power sharing in the associations,

most of them have enacted a policy of “positive discrimination”, appointing a migrant woman as President. Such policies are regarded as empowering only in some instances, while in other cases they are considered as mostly tokenistic.

Regarding the second aspect, the ability of associations to counter “othering” images of migrant women produces mixed results. Also, in this area the study highlighted some tension between the associations’ official policies around women’s free choice on veiling practices and the personal narratives of the women interviewed. In this area, age emerged as a significant dividing factor. While older Italian-born women – having had the chance to discuss the matter at length – regarded this issue as a matter of free choice, younger Italian-born women tended to see veiling practices in opposition to women’s freedom or as an obstacle to their relationship with the Muslim veiled members of the association.

The study also showed the possible value of cross-cultural comparisons on practices that are detrimental to women in the promotion of intercultural feminist activities, as shown by the experience of *Almateatro*.

This association realised two performances that prompted a reflection on women's relationships with their body across cultures, and established a comparison between FGM and female aesthetic surgery. The performances were not intended to promote forms of cultural relativism, on the contrary, they shed light on cultural practices that are detrimental to women and prevalent in the West, yet not commonly regarded as harmful. As emphasised by Honig (1999) it appears crucial that western feminists evaluate their own practices with the same severity they apply to the practices of women from other countries, if they aim to develop real forms of intercultural feminism.

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