
“Sub-Saharan Migration to Italy: A Gender Perspective”

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Abstract:

Studies on migration have always focused exclusively on men while often ignoring and disregarding the distinctive experiences of female migrants. This article will try to shed light on this specific group of female migrants by using country case studies drawn from Sub Saharan Africa. It seeks to bring to light the enormous difficulties faced by Sub Saharan African female migrants to Italy. Its ultimate goal is to show how gender interacts with Sub Saharan African migration to Italy in order to influence all processes of these South-to North movements and affect men and women differently.

Keywords: Sub-Saharan Africa, gender, migration, Italy, Nigerian women, female immigrants, migratory experience, etc.

1. Introduction:

During the early and middle twentieth century, women's transnational movement was limited because of their traditional domestic roles as wives and mothers. As these "gendered responsibilities" began to change with the emergence of globalization in the late twentieth century, women have become important participants in the flows of transnational mobility. According to the United Nations' 2013 report on migration, the number of migrant women accounted for 116 million, constituting forty nine percent of the total number of migrants worldwide.¹ Some scholars today are even speaking about "the Feminization of Migration", which is a process involving the rise in the number of female migrants in the world and the impact of gender on the different phases of migration.² In fact, it should be understood that a person's sex and gender identity can remarkably affect all aspects and stages of the migration process, including the reasons for migrating, the social networks migrants use to move, and the integration experiences and labor opportunities in destination countries. Through the use of country case studies drawn from Central, East and West Africa, this article will stress the complex relationship between gender and migration in order to bring to light their hazardous intersection and propel efficient gender-specific policies capable of reducing the disadvantageous impact of migration on women.

While extensive and elaborate has been the literature that dealt

with the issue of gender separately, or with the issue of Sub Saharan African migration to Italy, scarce have been the sources that dedicated special attention to the female component of SSA migration to Italy. In Italy, the first studies on female immigration appeared in the late 1980s, trying to explain the increasing flows of immigrant women coming to Italy especially for work purposes.³ Yet, such writings covered diverse nationalities of migrant women in Italy without shedding light on women originating from the SSA region. This article, therefore, will focus on this specific group of female migrants, using a gender perspective in order to understand how gender has been influencing their migration processes over the past fifteen years.

In fact, Sub Saharan Africans are standing out today as one of the largest categories of irregular migrants in the world.⁴ Through the use of country case studies drawn from Sub Saharan Africa, this article will derive general conclusions on the impact of gender on the different aspects and phases of women's migration experience from this region of the world to Italy. Its ultimate goal will be to examine how gender interacts with Sub Saharan African migration to Italy to influence all processes of these South-to North movements and procure different outcomes for men and women.

2. Gender-related Factors behind Sub-Saharan African Women's Decision to Migrate

2.1. Civil Wars and Armed Conflicts:

It is often said that men wage wars and women suffer their consequences. While war is basically a male decision, eighty percent of war casualties around the world are women and children.⁵ In her book *Masculinities, IR and the 'gender variable'*:

a costbenefit analysis for (sympathetic) gender skeptics, the Australian sociologist Raewyn Connell speaks about “hegemonic masculinity” in reference to the way how masculinity has influenced both war and international relations. Connell argues that wars represent a major field where masculinity and male power are constructed and reinforced, leading to exacerbating already-existing inequalities between men and women. A typical image that is usually produced during wartime is that of the fearless, powerful male soldier conquering the enemy’s territories in order to massacre and displace women and children. Thus, victims are constructed as “feminine”, while conquerors are constructed as “masculine”.

In this context, Sub-Saharan Africa represents the site of the most violent conflicts around the world in which these gendered dichotomies are perpetrated. Women living in those zones are affected more adversely than men. They are socially and economically damaged and they suffer the psychological impact of losing their loved ones. More importantly, they are exposed to gender-based violence and degrading practices of sexual abuse and mass rape and are at high risk of catching sexually transmitted diseases such as AIDS and HIV. One of the highest numbers of rape victims was recorded in the Rwandan genocide in the mid 1990s and ranged from 250.000 to nearly 500.000 Tutsi women.⁶ Such gender-based practices were actually part of a calculated political policy that is intended to besmear the morals and honor of the opponent’s society, as well as to take revenge on the “culture bearers” and “reproducers of the enemy”.⁷ They were performed as a spectacle and were used as a means of psychological torture of the victim and her relatives. Mass rape crimes were committed by Hutu men who deliberately sought to dishonor and discourage the

Tutsi opponent, turning the conflict into a psychological and moral one.

In some cases, acts of mass rape lead to forced pregnancy. Reproduction through forced pregnancy was described by some gynecologists as “reproductive coercion”.⁸ It aims to coerce the victim and exacerbate her psychological sufferance through inflicting upon her the psychological trauma of carrying the child of her rapist. During the conflict in Rwanda, hundreds of AIDS-infected men were released from hospitals and were used by Hutu extremists as “rape squads” performing mass rapes against Tutsi women as a tool of “slow, inexorable death”.⁹ Tutsi women were victims of other gender-targeted crimes aiming to destroy their reproductive abilities such as sexual mutilation which included mutilation of the vagina with machetes, knives, sharpened sticks, boiling water, and acid.¹⁰

Other high rape numbers came from one of the most violent SSA conflicts in the late twentieth century which is that in the Democratic Republic of the Congo. A study that was published in 2005 revealed that ninety percent of Congolese women were rape survivors.¹¹ In Sudan, a 2007 Human Rights Watch report indicated that “tens of thousands” of women had been raped or killed.¹² SSA women living in conflict zones were subject to other forms of gender-targeted crimes including forced abduction. They were constantly exposed to being captured either by rebels, government’s soldiers or terrorist groups for use in sexual entertainment. In Uganda, for instance, thousands of women and girls were captured and detained as sexual slaves by the Lords’ Resistance Army, a rebel group operating in northern Uganda.¹³ In Chad, nearly 10.000 women and children were abducted between

2005 and 2007 for use in domestic labor and sexual slavery.¹⁴ Such gender-targeted wartime violence is actually rooted in traditional perceptions championed by inherently patriarchal communities which consider women as “male property” or “commodity”. In such societies, masculine aggression and acts of rape are legitimized and sexual access to women even through force is considered as male entitlement.

Armed conflicts in Sub Saharan Africa continue to have a negative impact on women even in the post conflict period, with many widows having to shoulder the responsibilities of their families after the death or kidnapping of their husbands. These women become forced to play a new role within their societies and to leave their homes in search for jobs. Sometimes, women as sole family caretakers are wives of missing men. In this case, their economic situation is worse than widowed women, because unless the death of their husbands is confirmed, they can neither get a pension nor remarry and have a new breadwinner. After the Rwandan Genocide, for instance, women represented seventy percent of the population and widowed caretakers of nearly half of all Rwandan households.¹⁵ Being jobless, homeless, and often victims of physical and psychological post-conflict trauma, survival for these widows becomes a very difficult challenge.

This insecure atmosphere has actually turned Africa into one of the world’s top source regions of forced migrants. A 2004 study revealed that one out of three forced migrants around the world is in and from Sub-Saharan Africa.¹⁶ Another study by the United Nations Refugee Agency demonstrated that five of the top ten largest forced migrant populations around the world originate from Sub Saharan African countries, with a large proportion being made

of women.¹⁷ A report published by the United Nations Development Fund for Women in 2002, in fact, revealed that women and children make up nearly seventy five percent of the more than 35 million people displaced by armed conflicts worldwide, making of them the first victims of wars and armed conflicts.¹⁸

2.2. Dictatorial Regimes and Political Oppression:

In the post-colonial period, the large majority of Sub Saharan Countries were plagued with repressive authoritarian regimes which stifled the region's democratic aspiration after independence.¹⁹ Due to their ethnicity, religion, region, or simply gender, women across SSA face marginalization, lack of access to social care, and even more violent forms of political oppression such as torture and physical abuse. Across SSA, less than ninety girls for every one hundred boys have access to education,²⁰ more than eighty nine percent of the jobs occupied by women are informal, the gender pay gap is over thirty percent, and the number of women receiving social protection like old-age pensions are much less fewer than men.²¹

Adding to social and economic exclusion, SSA women living under dictatorial regimes are highly vulnerable to violence and physical abuse on the basis of their gender. In Eritrea, for instance, a country with one of the worst human rights records in the world, women are forced to join the military service for indefinite periods during which they get exposed to different forms of human rights violations including hard labor, torture, and sexual abuse. A 2010 report by the UN Commission of inquiry on Eritrea revealed high rates of rape and sexual assaults by military officials in Eritrean training centers. Nearly ninety percent of female detainees were subject to physical abuse.²² Those who refuse to yield to the orders

of military officials can be subject to severe punishment, often amounting to torture. Female Eritrean relatives of political activists and suspected members are also exposed to sexual assault and honor violation during forced interrogation of male members. In such a country where disappearance and arbitrary arrest and detentions are a widespread phenomenon, women are also doomed to become sole family carers and to face threats of poverty and starvation.

Such deplorable conditions have been forcing thousands of women to flee their country every month. According to the United Nations High Commissioner for Refugees (UNHCR), more than 305,000 Eritreans have escaped during the past decade, fifty percent of them are women.²³

2.3. Gender discriminatory cultural practices:

The majority of wives in Sub Saharan Africa live with the constant fear of being beaten or raped by their partners or male relatives. A 2007 UNOCHA study revealed that in Niger, for instance, seventy percent of women report being beaten or raped by their husband, father or brother.²⁴ Such regular acts of rape do not only have devastating effects on the female victim's physical and psychological health but also can lead to putting an end to the woman's life due to unsafe abortions. A 2004 South African study revealed that over thirty four thousand women in the African continent die annually from unsafe abortions.²⁵

Acts of marital rape are mainly attributed to the widespread phenomenon of early and forced marriages in Sub Saharan Africa. A study published in 2006 revealed that nearly forty two percent of

African girls are married before the age of eighteen, getting deprived of their right to education and exposed to grave health consequences.²⁶ The vast majority of these child victims come from families that suffer from poverty and underprivileged socio-economic situations. In order to get relieved from their daughters' living expenses, these families force their young girls to marry far older men who have already had sexual intercourses with multiple other partners. This makes young brides highly susceptible to sexually transmitted viruses such as HIV, as well as to other forms of sexual diseases such as cervical cancer. A recent study demonstrated that the percentage of young women afflicted with cervical cancer in Africa was the highest in the world.²⁷

Forced marriage is especially a common phenomenon in Sub Saharan African countries with large Muslim population such as Ivory Coast where Muslims make up nearly forty percent of the population. In Ivory Coast, twenty six percent of girls between fifteen and nineteen years old are forced into early marriages, getting deprived of their right to education and to optimal health.²⁸ Such widespread forms of social violence pushed many Ivory Coastian women to escape their country of birth and head for Europe where they seek recognition of their right to make free life choices. In 2012, the estimated percentage of the female component in migration flows from Ivory Coast to Italy amounted to seventy five percent, involving girls who decided to defy patriarchal norms in their home societies and seek freedom in the host ones.²⁹

2.4. Poverty and Economic Decline:

The "Feminization of poverty" is a contemporary phenomenon which describes the current global situation in which the number of women victims of poverty outreaches that of men, with seventy

percent of the world's poor being women.³⁰ In Sub Saharan Africa, the situation for women is even worse. A 2008 UNFPA report revealed that nearly half of the SSA population lives below the poverty line; eighty percent of those poor are women.³¹ The proliferation of poverty among Sub Saharan African women is attributed to a number of international and national factors.

On the international level, the rise of globalization and the integration of many African states into the global system resulted in harmful outcomes for women. Liberalization and decline of the welfare state reduced women's chances of enjoying social protection and benefiting from social care services and programs. Due to privatization, many women who used to work in the public sector became jobless or had to join the informal economy sector, becoming forced to work for longer hours and usually lower wages. On the national level, gender relations and traditional perceptions of women as subordinate individuals continue to deprive Sub Saharan African women of their right to property, making them therefore more vulnerable to poverty than men. Ironically, such restraints on SSA women's right to own productive property, such as lands or cattle, are contrasted with the fact that women constitute the majority of agriculturalists, undertaking nearly eighty percent of the activities of food storage and transportation, ninety percent of the activities of hoeing and heeding and sixty percent of the activities of harvesting and marketing.³² Accounting for seventy percent of Africa's employment, the agricultural sector represents a major source of income for women from the Sub Saharan African region. Denial of property rights for those women keeps them submissive to their male partners and at risk of losing their source of income in case of divorce or widowhood, resulting therefore in

the aggravation of their economic situation.

A gender perspective on poverty in Sub Saharan Africa involves an examination not only of the gender roots of poverty but also of the gender outcomes of this phenomenon. The feminization of poverty in many Sub Saharan African states in fact prompted higher school drop-out rates among girls. A 2000 UNFPA report demonstrated that, in twenty two Sub

Saharan African states, there are eighty percent fewer girls than boys in full-time education.³³ Gender implications of poverty also include increased recourse to prostitution. In many Sub Saharan African countries like Zimbabwe, prostitution represents the basic means of social and economic survival for women.³⁴ Poverty-driven sex is expected to cause serious infections such as AIDS or HIV considering the fact that poor women are less likely to use protective measures; even those who use condoms yield to the temptation of extravagant prices which men are ready to pay for sex without a condom.³⁵ Very recent HIV statistics revealed that, in Sub Saharan Africa, women accounted for fifty eight of all people infected with HIV.

Gender inequalities in the SSA region expose women to great social and economic vulnerabilities including poverty and its associated disastrous effects. In an attempt to escape this dismal reality, women resort to migration as the only solution to improve their future opportunities. By 2005, more than forty seven percent of the seventeen million African migrants were women.³⁶ Most of them are intraregional migrants, but they also move outside Africa towards North America and Europe. The perilous routes of the journey usually put these women at high risk of getting entrapped in trafficking networks which turn them into sex slaves. These

women's desperate need to escape financial misery and destitution force them to pay the smuggling fees through sexual services, unwillingly turning into sex slaves and becoming engaged in international networks of sex trafficking.

2.5. Italy as a Destination:

Generally speaking, Italy is one of the most important targets for international immigration and its annual growth rate of migrant presence is one of the highest in the European Union.³⁷ According to the IOM's 2013 Report, migrants in Italy represent more than nine percent of the total population; fifty four percent of them are women. Another more recent report revealed that by early January 2015, an estimated number of 5,014,437 foreign nationals were resident in Italy, representing an increase of 92,352 over the previous year.³⁸

Given its location in the heart of the Mediterranean and its very long coastline, Italy is considered as the most accessible entrance to Europe by many immigrants. Along with the Spanish shores, Italy's southern borders are the closest to the African continent and are consequently one of the easiest and most favorable destinations for Africans wishing to reach Europe.

Italy's attractiveness as a target country for many Africans is further prompted by the nature of its immigration-related laws which are relatively flexible in comparison to other European laws and regulations. In 1981, Italy signed the ILO convention on irregular migration which introduced measures to combat abusive treatment of illegal migrants and cases of exploitation and violation of their basic human rights in the labor market. In 1998, Italy designed its Turco Napolitano Law which was the first comprehensive Italian

immigration law. This legislation served to insure full rights for legal immigrants and basic rights for undocumented immigrants and to entitle foreign residents to more social rights such as family unification and access to health services.

Italy's location at the southern center of Europe and its lenient immigration policies made of it an alluring destination for many Sub Saharan African women fleeing poverty and armed conflicts in their states of origin and dreaming of a better life in Europe. According to a 2012 OECD report, Italy represents the second most important destination country for Senegalese and the third one for Ivoirians, Ghanaians and Nigerian.³⁹ As regards the female component, some Sub Saharan immigration flows are dominated almost entirely by women, such as those from Cape Verde Islands, Eritrea and Somalia.⁴⁰ Sub Saharan African women are now travelling independently in order to improve their economic prospects and fulfill their material needs. They are no longer moving to Italy simply in order to join their partners and unify with their families. Despite its countless benefits, this new status of Sub Saharan African women as independent migrants in Italy is making them increasingly more vulnerable to various sorts of threats including sexual abuse and labor exploitation.

3. The Impact of Gender on the Experience of Sub Saharan African Women in Italy:

3.1. Labor Exploitation:

Labor exploitation of migrants in Italy is a widespread phenomenon which takes advantage of the vulnerable legal situation of those migrants and their fear of reporting infringements over their labor rights, and which tends to reach higher levels in areas with large

numbers of irregular African migrants.⁴¹ In December 2012, for instance, Amnesty International published a report about the “severe” exploitation of irregular African workers in Italy. The report revealed that migrant workers in many areas of the South were paid forty percent less than Italians performing the same task and that they were often paid below the legal minimum. The report further hinted at other forms of labor exploitation of irregular migrants including long working hours and arbitrary wage reductions or delays.⁴² The irregular status of these workers makes them more susceptible to exploitation since they cannot denounce their exploiters to authorities for fear of being detained and deported back to their native lands.

In the case of irregular Sub Saharan migrant women, exploitation becomes doubled, first due to their status as irregular residents and second owing to their sex. Due to stereotyped roles of men and women, female migrant workers are more disadvantaged than their male counterparts. Being thought by employers to be more patient, enduring and willing to make concessions, Sub Saharan migrant women often find themselves victims of workplace discrimination and substandard working conditions which are commonly marked by lack of syndical representation and labor rights protection. These women can also be exposed to economic or physical exploitation and to denial of wages, or can be given wages below contractual agreements.

The majority of Sub Saharan female workers in Italy come from former Italian colonies such as Ethiopia, Eritrea and Somalia.⁴³ They get employed in the unskilled low paying service sector of the economy, such as agriculture, factory jobs and especially domestic work. A 2009 survey carried out by the Regional Observatory on

Integration and Multi-ethnicity in Lombardy region in the north-west of Italy estimated the percentage of domestic workers in the region at about thirty percent of the total number of irregular migrant workers resident in the region, most of which were African women.⁴⁴ Another survey carried out in Liguria region revealed that two out of three irregular female migrants in the region were domestic workers.⁴⁵ The irregularity of these women's residential status entails irregularity on the level of contractual agreements, increasing therefore female workers' vulnerability to exploitation and ill-treatment.

The widespread exploitation of African female migrants in the domestic sector has equally raised controversies related to the relationship between the white European female employer and the black African female employee. In her book *Gender, Migration and Domestic Service: The Politics of Black Women in Italy*, Jacqueline Andall develops a critical analysis of Italian Feminism through exploring the experience of African female migrants in Italy. The book argues that Italian women's quest for acquiring new social identities outside the domestic sphere led to the automatic exploitation of other women who were non-natives.

In fact, the change in feminine roles resulted in increasing demands by Italian women for domestic workers who could perform traditional roles that female native Italians do not want to perform anymore, like the care of children and old people. This has raised a question as to whether the social emancipation of the "modern and civilized" Western woman could have been made possible without the natural mistreatment of the "uncivilized" African woman, unmasking therefore a major flaw in the Italian feminist discourse.⁴⁶ The employment of large numbers of Africans women

in domestic works in Italy also raises a question as to whether migration can be still considered as an emancipation factor when female migrants who escaped domestic violence and incarceration in their native countries are locked in Italian houses in exchange for meager salaries.

3.2. Problems of Assimilation:

One of the major obstacles inhibiting African women from assimilating into the Italian society is the widespread negative cultural perceptions which often reduce them to mere commodities and objects of sexual entertainment. Due to the forced employment of thousands of female African immigrants, particularly Nigerians, in street prostitution by Italian mafia and organized criminal groups, African women have generally been stereotyped as prostitutes and objects of sexual pleasure.

Diving into the historical roots of this widespread cultural tendency to associate Africans with the notion of “hypersexuality”, historian and African Studies Professor Donald Martin Carter recalls the period of Italy’s colonization of Ethiopia in 1935 during which Italian soldiers marched to Ethiopia singing the popular song “Facetta Nera” (Little Black Face). The song, which entails an implicit erotic dimension, serves as an illustration of early cultural representations of African women as objects of sexual entertainment.⁴⁷

This historically rooted racism against black African women in Italy was further inspired and reinforced by the Racial Laws which were enacted during the Italian colonial Fascist period and which prohibited cohabitation with African women who were native inhabitants of the Italian colonies in order to preserve racial purity in Fascist Italy. Such a complex historical background had an

indirect influence on present-day cultural perceptions towards migrant women of African origins living in Italy, reducing them to low rankings and making their struggle for assimilation even more painful.

Another major impediment to the cultural integration of African women in the Italian society is the common classification of African migrants in general as aliens and outsiders. These stereotypical categorizations are derived from taken-for-granted perceptions inspired by colonial narratives that Africans are people situated outside the modern European world. This xenophobic attitude towards African descendents of former colonies makes of them an easy prey for social scapegoating and condemnation.

In her book *Global Lockdown: Race, Gender, and the Prison-Industrial Complex*, Professor of Ethnic Studies Julia Sudbury explains that Africans in Italy are increasingly vulnerable to suspicion and criminalization due to two major reasons, first because of their “hypervisibility” as immigrants of color which fuels already existing public sentiments of cultural and racial antipathy, and second owing to Italians’ psychological tendency, as citizens of the host country, to blame anything untoward which happens in their societies on any ethnic or racial minority group.⁴⁸

In this context, Professor Sudbury reported that while African immigrants in Italy represented only twenty three percent of the total arrest population, they constituted up to fifty seven percent of the total number of people who had complaints brought against them, bringing to light an alarmingly increasing culture of suspicion towards immigrants of African descent. This obvious inclination to classify African immigrants as criminals has been obstructing their path towards becoming part of the Italian society though denying

them residence documents and exposing them to a continuous threat of deportation.

African immigrant women in Italy are therefore subject to double stigmatization, first as being women and second as being of African descent. They suffer from widespread sentiments of hostility and rejection which are both gendered and racialized, turning their struggle for integration into an uphill battle.

3.3. Sex Trafficking:

Trafficking is nowadays considered as one of the most flagrant violations of human rights and human dignity. Some have even described it as “Modern Day Slavery”.⁴⁹ The majority of trafficking victims worldwide are women and girls, being mainly trafficked for the purpose of sexual exploitation. Trying to escape poverty and armed conflict in their origin countries, these women find themselves embroiled in sex trafficking networks. In Italy, many African female migrants are entrapped in the clutches of mafia gangs and prostitution groups, especially those coming from Western Africa.

Despite the adoption of many favorable regulations such as Article eighteen of the Italian Immigration Law which grants social protection to victims of trafficking, migrant women in Italy still face threats of forced prostitution. In 2004, the number of women victims of sexual exploitation in Italy ranged from a minimum of 19.710 to a maximum of 39.420.⁵⁰ In 2010, the Italian Chamber of Deputies on Social Affairs estimated that the number of trafficked prostitutes in Italy amounted to nearly sixty thousands. These women come mainly from Sub Saharan Africa and Central and Eastern Europe.⁵¹ In 2004, females of African origin constituted nearly forty percent of women trafficked to Italy for purposes of

sexual exploitation.⁵² Most of these women, before migrating, receive promises of marriage or a good job such as shopkeepers, maids or waitresses, but once they arrive to Italy, they are forced to sign prostitution contracts and unwillingly become engaged in sex work.

With the help of local mafia groups and secret brothel owners, organized crime groups manage to traffic women from Africa into Italy. They deprive them of their personal documents and force them through use of aggression and physical threats to sign work contracts which are ultimately the only means for paying back travel expenses to traffickers. In order to pay off their debts and cover their lodging fees, these women are compelled to sell themselves as prostitutes to passing drivers, they are forced into working for long hours under the watchful eye of their panderer or madam and they get exposed to severe physical and emotional abuse.

Among trafficked Sub Saharan female sex workers in Italy, Nigerians constitute the largest majority with an estimated number of ten thousand Nigerian women and girls engaged in forced prostitution.⁵³ In 2009, more than sixty percent of trafficked prostitutes in Italy were Nigerians.⁵⁴ Most of them have fled poverty and the lack of future opportunities in Africa's largest economy. The biggest majority of these women come from Benin City which has long been considered as the Nigerian hub of sex trafficking in Western Africa.⁵⁵

Once they arrive in Italy, these women are sold as sex slaves who must perform sex work in exchange for food and housing and until they pay back a debt of up to fifty thousand Euros as a prerequisite to getting freed.⁵⁶ With no more than twenty Euros for each sex act,

these women must undergo thousands of sex acts before they can be freed. Most of these sexual intercourses are performed without using protective sex methods in order to raise the price, exposing these sex slaves to frequent risks of pregnancy and unsafe back alley abortions, and increasing their vulnerability to sexually transmitted infections.

In this regard, the Italian government has adopted strict laws and legislations that aimed to curb and combat sex trafficking, probably the most important of which was the Measures against Trafficking in People law of 2003 which imposed penalties of eight to twenty years on people convicted of human trafficking. Yet, detection and prosecution remain remarkably low in comparison with the number of case filings. Cristina Bianconi, a special prosecutor for trafficking cases in Italy, testified that since the enactment of the 2003 anti-trafficking law, nearly one hundred fifty case filings were recorded each year, while convictions were very few.⁵⁷ While some have explained that this poor law enforcement primarily results from the difficulty of investigations due to the extreme secrecy of trafficking networks, others have attributed it to judicial corruption and the involvement of government officials in such networks.

4. Solutions to overcome the Risks of Female Sub Saharan African Migration to Italy

4.1. Expanding Social and Economic Protection for Women:

Considering the fact that Sub Saharan African women's resort to migration is often triggered by their economically vulnerable situation, a gender perspective is important in the development of policies and programs intended to empower women's economic status and facilitate their access to job opportunities.

According to 2008 ILO statistics, the percentage of women working in wage and salaried jobs in Sub Saharan Africa was only estimated at fifteen percent, and while employed women represented only fifty six percent of the total number of women in the region, men represented up to eighty percent.⁵⁸ In 2014, some Sub Saharan African countries such as Angola, Niger, Ivory Coast and Zimbabwe issued laws banning discrimination based on gender in hiring.⁵⁹ Yet, these laws cannot provide real guarantees as far as affirmative action programs are not adopted in order to provide effective concrete solutions to gender inequality and segregation in the formal labor market. In cases of mandatory downsizing in the formal sector, governments must invent new solutions like offering unemployment insurances and providing start-up loans for women to start small projects.

Furthermore, women in Sub Saharan Africa are in need for well-designed social protection policies which are both gender-considerate and gender-responsive. Given the disproportionate vulnerability to poverty between men and women in the Sub Saharan African region and females' weak access to social protection in comparison to males, Sub Saharan African women need to benefit from special gender-targeted policies which must aim to reduce economic barriers for them and empower their income security. Social-protection policies, including family and child allowances, health insurances and old-age pensions, can be efficient instruments to narrow gender gaps and enlarge women's life options. Yet, this cannot be achieved without the existence of a strong political will to combat gender inequality in the Sub Saharan African area and without committing to developing gender-targeted social protection programs and incorporating them into national

plans and budgets.⁶⁰

4.2. Combating Armed Conflicts and Addressing their Consequences on Sub Saharan African Women:

State inability or unwillingness to protect its citizens against violence and offer them security and safety has been a driving force behind Sub Saharan African women's migration. On that account, conflict-stricken sending states should adopt measures to ensure conflict prevention and conflict management and promote democratization. A particularly gender-sensitive policy framework should assess the impact of conflict on women in order to adopt policies tackling the gender dimensions of war.

Gender-targeted policies should also address post-conflict reconstruction and the disproportionately unfavorable impacts of war on women. The sufferance of Sub Saharan African women in post-conflict situations is not only limited to their status as citizens who have been killed, tortured and dislocated, but it is also exacerbated by their social vulnerability. Women who were victims of sexual assaults during war, such as rape, forced impregnation or sexual enslavement are often stigmatized and held responsible for the sexual abuse which they had endured, leading to their exclusion from their communities and even to their exposure to further threat and violence. In Sierra Leone, for instance, the Truth and Reconciliation Commission reported that after the Civil War which was ended in 2002, many women who had been targeted for sexual abuse escaped and never came back to their communities for fear of social hostility and ostracization.⁶¹ In Congo and Rwanda, the threat of social stigma and fear of social exclusion prevented many female victims of sexual violence from reporting the abuse and

seeking medical and legal care, leading to a big number of deaths due to sexually transmitted diseases.⁶²

Hence, urgent policy response should stress the need for increased medical assistance for female survivors of wartime sexual violence in Sub Saharan Africa, and should ensure that these victims be treated with both dignity and confidentiality. Psychological support is also recommended in order to help female victims to overcome their trauma and reintegrate into their societies, in addition to organizing public trainings and running campaigns aimed at raising awareness about human rights and teaching about legal retribution and criminal justice.

Yet, women should not only be treated as victims of armed conflicts in Sub Saharan Africa but also as active agents in peace-building and post-conflict reconstruction. Thereupon, Sub Saharan African women must be empowered and pushed to play an active role in postwar negotiations about economy rebuilding and rule-of-law promotion. The importance of engaging women in the democratization process should also be stressed through enhancing women's political representation and participation in national elections and constitutional reform. In this context, many post-war societies in Sub Saharan Africa have included women's empowerment and gender equity in their reconstruction agendas and programs. In Eritrea, for instance, the Eritrean People's Liberation Front considered women's liberation as an indispensable part of the peace-building process, and sought, through introducing revolutionary reforms in the fields of health, education, marriage and labor, to empower women's economic position, protect their rights and overcome gender inequality. Eritrean women were also invited to take part in peace negotiations and reintegration

programs in order to emphasize their pivotal role in stabilization and democratization.⁶³

Recognizing and addressing the grievous harm endured by women in conflict-stricken Sub Saharan Africa and trying to turn these victims into active agents for peace-building is expected to play an essential part in restoring female victims' confidence in the importance of their roles and discouraging them from migrating in quest for protection and recognition.

4.3. Host Country Measures to Combat the Impact of Gender on Female Immigration:

Considering the increasing rate of migrants illegally crossing its borders each year, Italy is growing afraid for its national security and domestic integrity. For this reason, it has recently passed a number of strict immigration laws, the most prominent of which was the

2002 "Bossi Fini" law, which sets a number of criminal sanctions to migrants caught illegally entering the country and residing in it, or returning after deportation. According to the Bossi Fini law, immigrants caught without residence permits are immediately deported, and sometimes arrested and detained before deportation. The law also determined strict measures according to which residence permits should be given, such as family reunions or working contracts. If the worker is unable to renew his/her contract or sign a new one in case he/she finds a new job after losing the initial one, then leaving the country after the permit's expiry date becomes an obligation.⁶⁴ The Bossi Fini law, which introduced restrictive solutions to irregular immigration, had negative impacts on migrant women in Italy including those coming from the SSA region. Italian women's associations opposed the new law which

they considered as particularly detrimental to women for many reasons. First, the vast majority of female migrants in Italy –nearly seven hundred thousand- work as domestic servants. Unlike the public sector, the private nature of domestic work makes women susceptible to becoming unemployed in case their employer passes away or in case they are forced to go on a maternity leave, risking therefore the renewal of their work contracts. Second, chained by the fear of losing their jobs, women become unable to complain about working conditions. This makes them much more vulnerable to exploitation and even to sexual abuse. Instead of helping them integrate within the Italian society and overcome their vulnerable status as women, the new law exacerbated female migrants' susceptibility to exploitation and ill-treatment, making their situation much more complex.

In an attempt to curb illegal migration, Italy also resorted to intensifying its border controls and sometimes to “externalizing” border surveillance by pressuring North African states to adopt more repressive measures against irregular migration in return for financial and military support. In 2004, Italian Prime Minister Silvio Berlusconi and Libyan President alQadhafi signed an agreement to fight illegal migration to Italy.⁶⁵ Libya pledged to close its borders and deport Sub Saharan immigrants illegally entering Libyan territories back to their countries. The Italian government, for its part, vowed sponsorship of mass deportations. Between August 2003 and December 2004, Italy financially contributed to fifty charter flights which deported nearly six thousand irregular residents from Libya back to their countries of origin, including Eritrea, Ghana, Niger and Mali.⁶⁶ The deportees comprised a large number of Sub Saharan women, including three

hundred seventy one from Nigeria alone.⁶⁷ Such repressive measures were considered by some Human Rights Organizations such as Amnesty International and Human Rights Watch as a violation of the right to asylum as well as of the principle of non-refoulement which bans the deportation of a victim of persecution. Both organizations condemned Italy's immediate rendering of illegal migrants without investigating their need for protection and whether they are escaping gender related persecution in their origin countries.

Through enacting restrictive immigration laws and carrying out large deportation campaigns, Italy's goal was to curtail the massive influx of illegal immigrants which the Italian Minister of Internal Affairs described as "organized assault on [Italian] coasts".⁶⁸ Yet, such policies continue to have detrimental outcomes for women and to make their situation even worse. Hence, Italy's response to migration should rather focus on integration more than regulation through implementing education, employment, housing and health programs and trying to facilitate immigrants' assimilation into the Italian society.

On the theoretical level, a tolerant and flexible attitude towards immigrants cannot be produced without providing a look beyond the frontiers of the nation-state and the concepts of nationhood and nationalism. In a post nationalist era characterized by the vanishing of borders and the increasing exchange of ideas and people, it is becoming important to offer a look beyond the limits and shackles of nationalism and trying to promote a tolerant and altruistic vision towards non-natives while fostering a less antipathetic and discriminatory conduct towards migrants.

As regards Italy's battle against sex trafficking, national-level

legislations need to be reinforced and consolidated by mutual cooperation between Italy as a receiving country and sending countries. To mention but a few examples of these supranational efforts to combat human trafficking, Italy has signed in 2000 a readmission agreement with Nigeria aimed at facilitating the reintegration of women who have been victims of sexual exploitation in Italy, adding to other anti-trafficking agreements signed in 2009 with third countries including the Nigerian state and targeted at providing technical and technological assistance to combat trafficking and setting up information exchange channels.⁶⁹ On another level, raising awareness campaigns and educating people about human trafficking would be highly recommended. Stress should also be put on the need to improve law enforcement capacity through funding police training and consolidating efforts to investigate and prosecute trafficking cases.

In addition to that, the host country should consider the strong connection between gender and sex trafficking and react correspondingly. It is important for policy makers in Italy to understand that gender inequality and sex-related discrimination are the major root cause behind sex trafficking and the sexual exploitation of women. Hence, gender-responsive strategies and schemes should be developed to raise awareness about women's right to be safe from violence and any form of exploitation and to empower women and engage them in antitrafficking activities.

4.4. Providing International Financial Assistance for the Host Country:

Italy's treatment of irregular migrants has raised many accusations and charges of abuse and neglect. In fact, many human rights organizations considered Italy's new immigration laws, such as the

Bossy Fini law, as a stark and blatant violation of Article Three of the European Convention on Human Rights.⁷⁰ International organizations, such as the EU, have further denounced Italy's denial of the right to asylum to many irregular migrant women who had recently landed on its borders.⁷¹ International organizations have also criticized Italy's mass deportations of female asylum seeker without investigating their need for protection and whether they are escaping any of the various forms of genderrelated violence.⁷²

Even though gender is not specifically addressed in the 1952 Refugee Convention to which Italy is party, gender-related violence is considered as a legitimate justification for women's claim for asylum.⁷³ In 2002, the UNHCR published more specific guidelines known as the *Guidelines on International Protection: Gender-related Persecution within the context of article 1A (2) of the 1951 Convention and/or 1967 Protocol relating to the Status of Refugees*.⁷⁴ These guidelines, which were referred to as the UNHCR Gender Guidelines, aimed to enhance a gender-sensitive understanding of women's claim for asylum and consider gender-related violence in the country of origin as a solid ground for a refugee status.

Italy's mass deportations of irregular migrants comprising large numbers of women, such as those organized in cooperation with Libyan authorities in 2004, were carried in an immediate and swift manner without investigating female deportees' right to asylum, resulting therefore in a direct violation of the 1952 Refugee Convention and a deliberate underestimation of the 2002 UNHCR Gender Guidelines.⁷⁵

Condemnation of improper treatment of asylum-seekers is, however, not enough. International actors must provide efficient

and sustainable solutions to manage the massive flow of irregular migrants fleeing violence and destitution in Africa through compensating host countries and providing them with financial support and assistance in order to subsidize rescue efforts and integration programs. In this context, the European Union allocated, in April 2015, a monthly budget of nine million Euros under the Frontex Triton border patrol program which aimed at supporting Italy in dealing with migratory pressure.⁷⁶ Also, in August 2015, the European Commission approved a six hundred sixteen million Euros emergency aid package in order to finance its migrant-rescue efforts for the next six years.

4.5. An International Effort to Combat the Root Causes of Female Sub Saharan African Migration:

International efforts must also address the root causes which push Sub Saharan African women to migrate, including poverty, insecurity and the lack of economic opportunities. In this context, the European Union ran a number of conferences with North and Sub-Saharan African states in order to launch development programs in the region. The 2006 Rabat process, for instance, which brought together fifty five European and African countries from North, West and Central Africa, sought to enhance bilateral, sub-regional, regional and multilateral cooperation initiatives aimed at addressing the root causes of irregular migration and providing concrete action plans to treat them.⁷⁷ The EU has also implemented a number of action plans providing an overall framework for its development strategy in a number of Sub Saharan African regions such as the Sahel Regional Action Plan which was basically destined for promoting economic growth in the Sahel and creating job opportunities across all sectors especially for youth.⁷⁸

The promotion of gender equality has constituted a substantial part of the European

Union's development aid programs towards Sub Saharan Africa. In this regard, the European Union adopted, in 2000, the Cotonou Agreement which listed gender equality and gender mainstreaming as top priorities in its development strategy towards Sub Saharan Africa. Article One of the agreement, for instance, made it clear that "systematic account should be taken of the situation of women and gender issues in all areas: political, economic and social".⁷⁹

The gender-responsive dimension of the European Union's development program towards the Sub Saharan African region was further asserted through the CSPs and NIPs agreements which were signed between the European Community and countries from Africa and which represented the basic instruments for implementing European development aid in the region.⁸⁰ These bilateral agreements placed gender equality as a top-level commitment and sought to achieve it through addressing three gender-related issues, including maternal mortality, lack of access to education, and the relationship between gender inequality and poverty, violence and sexually transmitted diseases.⁸¹

4. CONCLUSION

This article showed that gender represents a major factor in molding and shaping the migration experience of female Sub Saharan African migrants to Italy. It proved that these women's gender identity affects all aspects and stages of this migration process, including the reasons for migrating, the social networks these migrants use in order to be able to move to Italy, and the

integration experiences and labor opportunities in the destination country. A gender perspective, therefore, is highly important for better understanding the complexities and processes of Sub Saharan African women's migration to Italy. Though it is not the sole factor, gender contributes to a large extent in identifying the forms and enormity of human-rights abuses these migrant women are prone to. It shapes every stage of their migratory experience and significantly affects all aspects of their migration process.

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