

«The policy mirror mechanism»: the case of Turin

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Abstract

Different fieldwork conducted in the city of Turin shows that through the analysis of social services for immigrants one can see how general the dynamics of local policies are reflected. The main focus of the article is based on the supply-demand sides of social services for immigrants in the context partly of an increase in female immigration to the major cities in Italy, and partly of an arrangement of a progressive «welfare mix» in social services. The article is divided into two parts. In the first part local policy is analysed through the services available for immigrants in Turin, especially by considering the history and evolution of social services since the eighties. In the second part of the article the issue is illustrated through fieldwork examples pointing at some available strategies that migrant women apply in order to gain access to social services.

Key words: immigration policies, gender issues, social services, welfare mix, negotiation, northern Italy, Turin.

Resumen. «El mecanismo-espejo de las políticas». El caso de Turín

Este artículo es fruto de tres trabajos de campo realizados en la ciudad de Turín. Su objetivo principal es mostrar que a través del análisis de la inmigración se reflejan las dinámicas de las políticas locales. Se centra en el juego de la oferta y la demanda de servicios sociales para inmigrantes en el contexto de una creciente feminización de flujos migratorios en la ciudad, considerando especialmente la historia y la evolución de la oferta de servicios desde los años ochenta. En la segunda parte del artículo hemos tratado de mostrar el otro lado de la cuestión al observar las estrategias de las mujeres inmigrantes para poder tener acceso a los servicios sociales.

Palabras clave: cuestiones de género, servicios sociales, *welfare mix*, negociación, Italia del norte, Turín.

Summary

1. Introduction

In this article we present a case study analysis that is a result of different field-work¹ conducted in Turin on different issues related to immigration such as gender, social rights, immigrants associations and social welfare. The main point of this article is that through the analysis of everyday practice and strategies surrounding immigration, one can see how the dynamics of local policies are reflected as well as negotiated in a local context. There are two main focus areas behind our points: *firstly* the strong presence of female migrants in the cities of Northern Italy; and *secondly* the significant role of **the third sector**² in Italy.

In the following we have chosen «the policy mirror mechanism» as a term to illustrate how immigration policies not only reflect but also support general local policies³.

The «policy mirror mechanism» implies that by looking partly at immigration policies, and partly at immigrant women's negotiations in everyday life, in the case of Turin, essential characteristics of the local policies can be seen. Characteristics such as: 1) «the specificity approach», i.e. the persuasion that immigrants problems have to be faced with *specific* policies and *ad hoc* institutions, rather than favouring direct inclusion into mainstream services,

1. This joint venture is the result of a seminar held in January 1998 at the Dipartimento di Sociologia of the Università degli Studi di Turin. Caponio's contribution is based on her thesis on immigrants associations in Turin as well as her collaboration in different research studies which deal with the issue of immigration policies at the city level (MOST programme, IRES Morosini programme etc.). Ribas' contribution is based on a field-work on the interaction of actors in welfare mix arrangements for immigrants which has been financed by the TRM programme «Family and the Welfare state» coordinated by MZES; University of Manheim. The second part of the article is mainly based on Anette Nielsen's fieldwork conducted at the centre Alma Mater and the Caritas Femminile in Turin during the winter 1997/98. The two organisations became the physical setting for encountering migrant women—with or without a residence permit—in order to know more about their life in Turin, and in particular *how* they negotiate social rights like access to the labour market, housing and health care.
2. «The third sector» is in this welfare mix context, the private political, ethnic and catholic associations which usually collaborate with public welfare institutions.
3. We are aware that it is equally important to look at the reproduction of economical and political structures inherited from the immigrants' country of origin, as well as the importance of how national political structures reproduce specific policies towards immigration.

2) the complexities of a welfare-mix approach, which can be well reflected in the case of foreign immigration and 3) the characteristic polarisation when dealing with subjects such as gender. The latter, as we shall see, in our case being divided into two discourses: a leftist-feminist and a catholic one.

Zincone (1994a and 1994b) has pointed at some of the characteristics of the Italian political system which helps to highlight an analysis of immigration policies and daily practices:

- 1) the discrepancy between proclaimed public intent and the law, and between laws and the administrative implementation;
- 2) the discretionary behaviour of administrative bodies and civil servants, common to the Italian legal system;
- 3) the lack of a clear-cut distinction between civil associations, public administration and public services. This public-private interweaving appears even more clearly when pondering the provision of social services for irregular immigrants;
- 4) the lack of intercultural tradition;
- 5) and important local differences among Italian cities and regions in relation to the renewal of permits, the leftist tradition, the role of voluntary associations and the providing of services.

Other researchers like Lostia and Tomaino (1994) have also indicated similar aspects to the ones mentioned by Zincone, expressing how immigration challenges the Italian bureaucratic system and the Italian health system.

Italy and Immigration

The flow of immigrants into Italy started during the mid 1970's, greatly due to the closed border policies adopted by the Northern European countries. However, the issue does not enter the political agenda until a decade later, in 1986, when the first immigration law is approved. In the meantime the only norms in force are those of the 1931 *Code of Public Security*, which essentially concerns admission and expulsion of foreigners, and assigns a considerable power to police and judicial authorities.

In the early 1980's, however, many local administrations, especially in the regions of the North and the Centre, start to mobilise practical solutions to the problems faced by the growing number of non-national residents. Turin is among these cities. A Foreign Office (*Ufficio stranieri*) was opened in 1982, with the concrete involvement of third sector voluntary organisations, especially the Catholic *Caritas*, which was already active in the first accommodation of foreign students arriving from third world countries⁴. This was just

4. In fact, the Turin diocese has always demonstrated particular interest in development problems in the third world countries, and since 1963 established a special Service for the Third World Countries. It is this same office that already in 1975 organised a centre for the immigrants' first reception, the so-called *Ciscat*, Centre for the Reception and Cultural Exchange

the starting point of a series of initiatives which in the following years have been developed in strict collaboration with other local institutions (the Region Piemonte, the Province, the Provincial Education Authority), giving way to a specific pattern of social integration, also partly adopted by recent national legislation (Zincone, 1998).

The strong presence of female immigration flows in Italy can be viewed as a response to the demand in the service sector, which covers «the genderised jobs» of personal and domestic services. A fact which will be very important when asking why this mechanism is much more prevalent in Southern Europe than in Northern Europe. If we apply «the policy mirror mechanism», the gender approach in immigration can be seen as a reproduction of the typical gender relations of some societies. King (in this monograph) points out: «these roles can be regarded as traditional female jobs and an extension of the stereotyped role of women in Southern Europe and Catholic societies family as care/helpers/cleaners etc. Hence it is no surprise that the main countries for female labour migrants (also in the Italian case) are Catholic countries where this model of gender relation and female comportment is strongly embedded». While the hiring of female migrants is a strategy for Third World Country women's employment, it is also a care solution for urban middle classes, who recruit immigrant women for householding (cleaning and caretaking of children and the elderly). This solution of mercantilist services as a response to the women's double burden ends up by reproducing a pattern of a traditional bourgeoisie Italian family, in a modified model of extended families.

2. The specificity approach for social services

As previously pointed out (Ferrera, 1994; Fargion, 1996), the third sector's voluntary organisations, especially the catholic ones, have always assumed in Italy a central role in providing anticipatory answers to various social needs, especially with respect to marginalised groups. This is why it is important to look at all actors who intervene in the local policy sphere, and not exclusively analyse the role of the various institutional services as it has been traditionally considered. Replacing activities traditionally run by the state and now operated by the third sector implies dealing with a much more complex model of interaction between different actors and different functions.

In analysing the social services for immigrants in Turin, we have to consider the more general debate which has taken place all over Europe in recent years around what type of services should be offered, i.e. general or specific. With reference to this general opposition, the city of Turin has actually adopted an *ad hoc* approach, in order to face the varying exigencies of the immigrant population regularly or irregularly present in the city. In particular, we can

with Foreign People (*Centro per l'accoglienza e lo scambio culturale con gli stranieri*), mainly directed to third world students (Ires Piemonte, 1994: 33).

distinguish three main periods: 1) the emergency policy, until 1990; 2) the creation of a network of specific services, based on the interaction between the municipality and the third sector from 1990 to 1995; and 3) its consolidation period, since 1995 and onward.

In general in Italy the «specificity» approach has prevailed. The budget to create the service infrastructure at the local level has been one of the main results of the second and most influential immigration law, *Legge Martelli*. On the basis of this law, services have been organised through specific and specialised structures by the so-called reception centres: *prima accoglienza*. Other services like the informal health service, ISI (*Servizio Sanitario Immigrati*) and the Co-ordinating Centre for Youth: *Ufficio coordinamento minori*, have been local initiatives supported by the municipality of Turin and conducted thanks to the *Martelli Law's* budgets and imposition.

The existence of a particular «Turin network» in the delegation of services is an important issue concerning the study of the welfare mix dynamics at the local level. Another important issue is that the replacement of activities traditionally run by the state and now operated by the third sector opens up the debate on the weakening of the democratic principles in welfare services.

The first response to the needs of insertion and integration of immigrant women comes from the third sector, considering the lack of public services for this relative new category of population. The *Caritas* in Turin, decides in 1975 to organise *ad hoc* services, like the CISCAT (*Centro Internazionale Scambi Culturali Accoglienza Stranieri*) and the «*Servizio Migranti Femminile*», dealing with problems related to women, family and lone mothers. Since the decree *Dini* in 1996 this service has enabled the integration of 150 ex-prostitutes—mainly Nigerians—in families and factories in the city of Turin and its provinces.

1. *The emergency policy and the first mobilisations of the 1880's*

The Municipality of Turin (*Comune di Torino*) was the first institutional actor in a local context to mobilise and co-ordinate the services already offered to immigrants by voluntary organisations, thus implicitly acknowledging the necessity of an institutional response in the void of national legislation. Hence, the offer of social policies for immigrants in the city of Turin emerges as the product of a positive convergence between local administration and the third sector, which decided to collaborate rather than confront each other. In 1982 the appointment of a well known priest/factory-worker, Don Fredo Olivero, as the head of the then established «Office for Foreigners and Nomads», gave a formal link to such a collaboration. The Office, which was established on the initiative of the mayor's cabinet⁵, was divided into two sectors. One sec-

5. At this time, the city was governed by a left-wing majority and Diego Novelli, of the former Italian Communist Party (ex Pci, Partito Comunista Italiano).

tor concerning gypsies and nomad people, with the running of the public nomad camps at the periphery of the city. The other sector, on which we shall focus our attention, aims at dealing with foreign immigrants.

At the beginning of the 1980's, the number of immigrants in Turin was only a few thousands, primarily consisting of women from the Philippines, Somali and Eritrea, most of them employed as domestic workers. Beside these groups of women there were also university students and political refugees⁶. At the same time however, a growing number of irregulars⁷ were beginning to arrive from Morocco and Central Africa (Senegal, Ivory Coast and Ghana) working in small industries or as street vendors. In this context, The Office for Foreigner and Nomads began to act as an «interlocutore» for foreign people, offering them information and advice, especially during the first regularisation and amnesty disposed by law 1986/943. The Office for Foreigners and Nomads has since worked as a «bridge function» (Città di Torino, 1996: 11), with the aim of shortening the distance between the newcomers and the services. Accommodation was the first priority and, thanks to the active collaboration with third sector catholic associations, a network of centres and services has been created since the mid 1980's.

Associations collaborating with the Office of Foreigners and Nomads were admitted to various forms of financial support, regular or just occasional, and depending on the public relevance of services offered. On behalf of an already existing social service for immigrants combined with financial support, the Municipality has been able to provide a wide range of urgent services: from temporary shelters to health care, both to regular and irregular immigrants, thus also indirectly taking charge of *borderline situations* which public authorities did not —whether willingly or because they were not allowed to intervene directly (Zincone, 1994). In 1991 two new Accommodation Centres were established by the Municipality, both tended by cooperatives under contract. Access to these structures is mediated by the Office for Foreigners and Nomads, and an (in)formal application has to be filled out in order to be inserted into the waiting list⁸. During the 1990's the Office for Foreigners and Nomads continued to assume a central role in informing the administration of the Municipal on the problems faced by new immigrants. In particular, the second regularisation introduced by Law 1990/ 90 —or the *Martelli Law*, revealed an increasing number of foreign, irregular children, some employed as street vendors and living in very difficult conditions. As we will see below, the

6. The main areas of origin were the Middle East (Palestinians, Kurds, Iranians etc.), Africa (Eritrea, Rwanda) and South America (Chile, Argentina, Brazil).

7. Since the term «illegal» implies a criminal connotation, or an attitude of not being wanted, we deliberately have chosen to use the term «irregular», to indicate when a foreigner is without a tourist visa or a residence permit.

8. At present, besides these two municipal shelters (155 beds), the Office can also count on the availability of 240 beds of catholic associations, 160 flats and 16 pre-fabricated buildings of lay voluntary associations, and 10 more apartments owned by Caritas (Allasino, Bocco, Caponio, Ciafaloni, Ricucci and Zincone, forthcoming: 27).

involvement of the Municipality in favour of foreign children represent another example of the *ad hoc* emergency approach, which has characterised social policies for immigrants in Turin.

2. The 90's: the creation of a network of specific services, between new emergencies and integration

In September 1990 the Education Department established a special office for the problems of non-resident foreign children, the so-called *Ufficio mondialità*⁹, in order to ease their insertion at school as well as their participation in sport and recreational activities. The modification for access to the kindergartens, which previously required residency as an essential pre-requisite for insertion, is one of the results of the work of the office (Città di Torino, 1996: 77). Moreover, in the same year, an agreement was signed with the Provincial Education Authority (*Provveditorato agli studi*) and the Region Piedmont, which, in 1992, led to the institution of an inter-agency body, the CIDISS (*Centro Informazione Documentazione Inserimento Scolastico Stranieri*—Centre of Information and Documentation for the Insertion of Foreigners at School). CIDISS have the mandate of favouring access to education of under age immigrants, especially irregular residents (Città di Torino, 1996: 77).

Parallel to the above developments, the presence of under age street-vendors, for the most Moroccans, often exploited by criminal and illegal organisations, gets more and more visible. In order to face such a phenomenon, the Social Service Department of the Municipality sought an agreement with the Juvenile Court and the Police. «The Office for Underaged Non-EU-residents» (*Ufficio Minori Extracomunitari*) was opened in June 1992, for the treatment of particularly difficult situations such as those experienced by irregular children either arriving and living on their own, living with irregular parents or living with legal but non resident parents. In 1994 a new agreement was signed by the Municipality (the office for Foreigners and Nomads and the Social Services Department), the Juvenile Court, the Ward Section of the Police Department and the Juvenile Prison. This agreement was intended to protect immigrant children who might have incurred in problems due to the lack of parents and to safeguard the children's right to live in his or her household (Città di Torino, 1996: 96). On the basis of this new document, a special permit for «reasons pertaining to justice» (*Soggiorno per Ragioni di Giustizia*) allowing the underaged to register at a local school, may be granted by the Juvenile Court in particularly difficult cases¹⁰.

9. As it has been stressed by the Municipality of Turin, the Office was established in the spirit of the 1989 Convention of New York on the Rights of Childhood, ratified by the Italian parliament with Act no. 176 of 1991.

10. This measure, however, does not imply the legalisation of parents and relatives (Allasino, Bocco, Caponio, Ciafaloni, Ricucci and Zincone, forthcoming: 26; Città di Torino, 1998: 63-67).

Thus, in the early 90's the Municipality of Turin, or, in particular, the Office of Foreigners and Nomads and the Education and the Social Services Departments, succeeded in establishing a basic network of social services for immigrants, with the direct participation of both third sector voluntary associations —especially in the case of emergency services— and other relevant public institutions¹¹. As it has been recently noticed by Zincone (1998), this private-public mix has favoured the concrete undertaking of highly innovative policies, which have been adopted also by the latest immigration law, i.e. Act 1998/40.

Another characteristic of municipal intervention which has to be emphasised, as mentioned before, is its *ad hoc* aspect, since social policies in this period were explicitly directed to immigrants in *specific* difficult conditions, rather than to foreign residents in general. In practice, the strategy of the municipality has been that of reacting to emerging social problems by mobilising all the relevant local actors (public and private) interested in a specific issue. However what was still lacking at the beginning of the 1990's was a coherent policy of social integration of immigrants. Especially of regular immigrants, which might not face the dramatic difficulties of irregular immigrants, but still encounter considerable problems in having access to general social rights. To this effect, the *Ufficio Mondialità* (for nonresident children) was just a first partial response, aimed at favouring the insertion of foreign children at school, without any direct intervention into school activities (intercultural curricula, language courses etc.).

The first signal of the necessity of a more comprehensive approach to social integration was brought about by a group of immigrants, and in particular by a multicultural association called *Harambé*, which in 1990 organised the first course¹² for «cultural mediators», with the collaboration of the Department for Vocational Education of the Province (*Assessorato alla formazione professionale della Provincia di Torino*) and with a financial contribution of the Region¹³. According to the associations which are involved in the training of cultural mediators in Turin, cultural mediation is neither synonymous of hiring mere interpreters nor social assistants, but rather a sort of «bridge» between different cultures; as they should be able to understand the problems of their fellow citizens and render them intelligible to the Italian institutions. After a one-year-course, the participants gain a diploma which is recognised by the Region Piemonte.

The Cultural mediators were initially employed by the Local Health Unit (USL¹⁴) in an area with a high density of immigrant residents. In 1992 the

11. Such as the Provincial Education Authority and the Region in the case of education; the Juvenile Court, the Ward Section of the Police Dept. and the Juvenile Prison in the case of irregular underaged.

12. Not only in the Region Piedmont, but, probably, also at a national level, as Jean-Marie Tschotscha, president of the above mentioned association, maintains.

13. Since then, several courses have followed, some specifically devoted to women, such as the one organised by the *Alma Terra* association.

14. USL are now called ASL: Local Health Units. The transformation means more control on budget and limited availability for irregular migrants (Zincone, 1994: 34).

previous mentioned *ISI*—an office for health and information for immigrants, was established. This service is run by the cooperative, *Cooperativa Senza Frontiere*, financed by the Region Piemonte. At the *ISI* a doctor can be contacted, and specialised medical examinations can be appointed through the help of the cultural mediators. This specialised health unit helps partly to eliminate the bureaucracy, also well known to Italian citizens, and partly to mobilise an informal health structure blessed by the public system, because it can confront *also* the irregular immigrants.

The employment of cultural mediators in health services can be seen as another *ad hoc* response of regional authorities, which is convenient for the local administration of the National Health Service (SSN). As in the case of the other municipal policies mentioned above, the collaboration between the public and private sector on specific issues and problems has favoured the introduction of an innovation in social policy; yet, the cultural mediators will not remain restrained to the health sector. By now cultural mediation is a fast growing and widespread concept and institution implemented in almost every public office in Turin. The institution of cultural mediation will in the future play a central role in the formal integration strategy of the municipality of Turin.

3. From 1995 onward: the consolidation of the intercultural discourse

Starting from 1994, cultural mediators can be found at the Population Registration Section at The Office of Foreigners and Nomads. At the same time, specific projects have been undertaken with regard to school insertion and children's status, as in the case of the *Ufficio Mondialità*. Since 1996 the *Ufficio Mondialità* has coordinated a team of cultural mediators which help the insertion of foreign children in kindergartens and primary schools, seeking for the active involvement of their families. Cultural mediators are also employed by the Office for Underaged Non-EU-residents where they have the delicate task of getting in touch with children living in difficult conditions.

Cultural mediation can be regarded as the result of a progressive diffusion of the *ad hoc* approach to various offices and services. Specialised operators are enrolled by the local administration in order to fill the gaps in the communication between foreign users and local institutions, and improve immigrants' access to social services. However, the role of cultural mediators has not always been welcome, and it has previously been stressed that it is the civil servants who should change their attitude and apply an intercultural approach rather than contracting more specialised staff.

Starting from this concrete positive experience with cultural mediators in Turin, a broader intercultural discourse on integration has developed, carried out through multicultural projects. The discourse is based on the notions of *dialogue* and *mutual exchange*, i.e. on the dynamic aspects of social interactions, thus fostering mutual learning and adjustment.

With this intercultural discourse as a base, in 1994, the project of an Elective Committee for Foreigners (*Consulta elettiva degli stranieri*) started up, as a first

step toward political participation. The Committee, first elected in 1995, is supposed to gather together immigrants of different nationalities and provide them with an opportunity to give voice to their common interests as foreign residents. As a result, the electoral system is essentially directed at reproducing the complex reality of immigration in Turin. Nevertheless, many problems still have to be faced in order to get a proper representation.

The intercultural discourse became apparent by means of the opening of an Intercultural Centre in 1997 (*Centro Interculturale*), a project already undertaken in 1994 by the Cultural Resources and Communication Department of the Municipality of Turin. The Centre addresses both Italian citizens and foreigners and, by means of various activities (formation, research, conferences, international newspaper library, etc.). It promotes opportunities for meeting and interaction with different cultures. The Intercultural Centre in Turin unfortunately shares certain disadvantages with other similar intercultural centres, which, too often, they are neither located in the centre of the city nor in an area where immigrants live.

We do not wish to enter into further detail here, but just stress how the intercultural discourse, initially arisen in the domain of social services with reference to the new role of the Cultural Mediator, has expanded also to other policy sectors, namely participation and cultural policy, becoming the characteristic feature of integration policy of immigrants in Turin.

We lack systematic data on the actual results of such policies, i.e. if they have produced the expected outcomes or not. In particular, the role of the Elective Committee, which has proved highly conflictual and very poorly productive, is not yet clear. At the same time, the Intercultural Centre has not gained the central relevance that the initiators presumed. Activities are few and very poorly advertised. Moreover, the Intercultural Centre has not increased the visibility of immigrant associations, which is in sharp contrast with the protagonist of Italian third sector organisations in this field.

Thus, the Turin private-public sector mix, which has proved successful in coping with various new social needs, still appears to be unsatisfactory as far as participation is concerned, since the compelling actors are still Italians, with the exception of a few highly involved foreigners often with Italian citizenship, who are involved in multicultural associations and engaged in the formation of cultural mediations. In this way the intercultural project still rests open-ended.

3. Gender and third sector organisations. Shortcuts to social services?

In the first part of the article we have seen the evolution of social services for immigrants at a general local level in order to see what services are today available for immigrants, in this part we will focus on how migrant women in practise negotiate strategies which can fulfil their demands for different services. On this line, the intercultural centre *Alma Mater* and the *Caritas Femminile* are both examples of third sector organisations, as they both, to a certain

extend, are integrated into the coordination of services for migrant women in Turin. The welfare mix analysis is therefore suitable when looking at these strategies. The collaboration between the private and public sectors fosters an informal mediation and exchange of social services. In practice, networks established through the third sector have the advantages of creating shortcuts and possibilities of access for migrant women to social services independently of their regular or irregular status, *but* always on an informal basis.

The intercultural centre *Alma Mater* and the *Caritas Femminile* are both central places in Turin for the negotiation of migrant women's access to the Italian welfare system and society; yet, we might wonder *who* addresses which organisation —and why? In fact, the two organisations are generally identified with two different discourses, a feminist one in the case of *Alma Mater* and a catholic one in the case of *Caritas*, which might appeal differently to different migrant women, and their use of the organisations. However, that distinction turned out to be more *ideological*, than an actual *practice* among women. In practice, women often participate and use either one of the structures, for instance in order to find a job, search for housing or to gain access to the health system. Access to information and public services are gained through «friendships» with certain persons in the network as well as references to kin, fellow country fellows, language or religion. The choice of getting in contact with and participating in a particular organisation is either a coincidence or a strategic choice, often depending on the acuteness of the specific needs experienced by migrant women themselves —*rather* than a conscious ideological choice and statement. In other words, migrant women use the various organisations according to specific situations and difficulties in having access to information and social services in everyday life.

1. *Alma Mater: a centre for mediation*

Alma Mater is an intercultural centre for both migrant and Italian women, established in 1993 with the aim to improve the social status of migrant women living in Turin. Intercultural activities such as «ethnic» dance, food and language courses are particularly valued, since they are considered to increase the self-esteem and valorisation of the migrant woman in the Italian society. Also information and experiences with various practical everyday problems are exchanged, between migrant women and the Italian women, who know how to handle and navigate in the Italian formal and informal system¹⁵.

The Italian women who took part in the foundation of the intercultural centre *Alma Mater*, were all active members of a women's organisation called

15. Various activities and projects take place at *Alma Mater*, for instance a day-care centre, social and legal counselling, an information centre, an intercultural theatre group and a Turkish bath (*hammam*) run by the cooperative *La Talea*. *Alma Mater* is used —as it is in this article— in the broadest sense, indicating both the centre and the organisation, but the name of the organisation behind the centre is *Alma Terra*.

Produrre e Riprodurre (produce and reproduce). A number of these women were employed in the public administration and social services (some are on early retirement) and were also politically active in the general women's movement in Turin. Some of these women are also members of The Board of Equal Opportunity for Women and Men established by the Region Piemonte. This means that, right from the beginning, a small group of Italian women were in a position of mediating between the formal system (the municipality of Turin, the Region Piemonte as well as EU funding) and the organisation. The central role of these women has been their ability to navigate in the public administration through informal networks, established during a lifetime of political involvement and social work in Turin. For most migrant women dealing with *Alma Mater*, this group of Italian women are still viewed as key members of the association and often identified with the organisation itself.

Migrant women participating in *Alma Mater* represent a great variety of different cultural, religious and social backgrounds. They arrive from different places and countries¹⁶ and their ages vary from 18 to around 60. A growing number of women have neither husband nor children at home or in Italy. Some have been raised in wealthy families, but had to escape without anything because of war. Some have university degrees obtained in their home countries, which are not recognised in Italy. And other women have close to any formal education, but decided to go to Italy to look for better jobs and opportunities in a richer part of the world.

Women who arrive and participate at *Alma Mater* have many different ambitions and motives, ranging from gender issues or ethno-political motives to emancipation and/or economical self-realisation projects. The wide range of motives have to be related to their very complex *experiences* as migrant women.

Giovanna Zaldini, a Somali woman who has been the first (and former) president of *Alma Mater* identifies the shared background of migrant women participating in the centre as the *experience of being a stranger or alien* —to belong to a minority (Zaldini, 1997: 17). Such an experience influences both the potentials and the possibilities of the life of each woman. This means that the experience, which at one level unifies the migrant women, at another level can divide them, thus generating competition and resistance among them. The diverse concerns and values which *Alma Mater*, as a centre and an organisation, embraces and acknowledges can thus be considered a weakness, because it creates conflicts within the organisation. At the same time however, the broadness of concerns and values can also be regarded as the strength of the centre, because it creates a space for continuous negotiation and cultural exchange.

The centre *Alma Mater* also helps to solve a series of very practical problems. To encounter various demands, a number of four women representing different countries and languages, are employed as cultural mediators. They help

16. From non-European countries women are represented from Morocco, Somalia, Zaire, Tunisia, Nigeria, Egypt, Peru, Brazil, and the Philippines. From Eastern Europe women arrive especially from countries like Albania and Rumania.

to solve and organise acute problems such as need for day-care, enrolment of children in the public day-care and school system, as well as information on how to get access to the health system, residence and work permits, housing and work. The cultural mediators at Alma Mater also mediate jobs between migrant women and Italian families. An Italian volunteer deals with Italian families who demand house-cleaners or caretaking of the elderly.

Many migrant women who have attended a course of cultural mediation at Alma Mater are today employed as contract workers, at almost all the various public offices in Turin. They are occupied through the intercultural cooperative *La Talea*, situated at Alma Mater. Since foreigners without Italian citizenship can't be employed directly by the public administration, a solution was found through the foundation of cooperatives, as an alternative way to the public sector recruitment. As we have considered above, this coordination of the public and the private sectors, have turned out to carry certain advantages personally for the cultural mediators, as well as for the public and the private institutions involved—as well as for *some* immigrants. Networks have been established within this private-public system, in a way that basic information, help and support for migrant women, can be mediated through specific organisations and individual «gatekeepers». In practice this means that a migrant woman—legal or illegal—has access to the formal system and social rights depending on the specific networks she finds herself in.

2. *The Caritas Femminile. An example of catholic mediation*

At *Caritas Femminile* nuns and volunteers offer informal mediation between migrant women and the Italian society and institutions. According to the responsible nun, the mission of the centre is to encourage integration of foreign women. Integration is pursued through language courses and domestic work training for both women with regular and irregular status. *Caritas Femminile* also mediates shorter apprenticeship programmes offered by the Region (*corsi di formazione professionale*) in the public education and training system, though only offered to women with a residence permit.

The centre also has an apartment where migrant women who are in difficult situations related to lack of housing and income can stay for a period of time¹⁷. Moreover, at the centre there is also a volunteer who mediates jobs between migrant women and Italian families. After the *Dini* Decree in 1996, hiring an irregular migrant for unregistered domestic works can lead to a fine or even imprisonment¹⁸. Despite the fact that police controls are very rare,

17. The last couple of years especially Nigerian women have come for help at the centre. *Caritas* started in 1996 a project, in collaboration with a number of other organisations, to help forced and illegal prostitutes in Italy to change their lives and juridical status, by denouncing the pimp behind the trafficking.

18. Such a provision has been confirmed by the recent immigration law, i.e. Act n. 40 of 8th March 1998.

Caritas has changed its policy, and mediates only jobs to women with a residence permit and families who officially register as employees and taxpayers.

Caritas Femminile is also a centre where women meet and exchange daily news and information about where to go and ask for jobs, housing, a shelter for the night or a meal at lunch time. More information can be obtained about ethnic networks and the churches which help specific groups such as Romanian, Philippines or Peruvians. Women who already have a permit to stay and work go there temporarily when they are looking for a new job. Jobs are also exchanged between women, and they help each other to get a job through friends or through the employer's relatives. In other words, informal networks among women, relatives and the different churches and communities they belong to ensure the circulation of jobs and information through a «mouth to mouth» method, for which the Italian expression is known as «*passa parola*».

Priests and nuns, as well as volunteers, act as mediators between the women and the Italian families. Moreover, at *Caritas Femminile* jobs classified as «difficult» are mediated unofficially through networks which meet the labour demand of many migrant woman. An example of a «difficult» job can be looking after a sick person all night at the hospital, because it is very stressing and low paid.

4. Conclusions

In the Italian context the case of Turin has been generally considered to be a pioneer in social policies for immigrants (see for instance: Zincone, 1998a; 1998b). Many of the innovations introduced by local administrators are embodied in the new immigration law (Act 1998/40); this is especially the case of cultural mediation and intercultural education.

In this article it has been shown how the intensive collaboration with the local third sector has favoured an open attitude towards immigrants' problems and social needs. However, the «policy mirror mechanism» perspective has emphasised the persistence of institutional relationships which are characteristic of the Italian welfare system. For instance, the prominence of Catholic associations reflects the traditional religious bias, which has been a constant in the offer of social services, as we have seen through the role of the *Caritas Femminile*. We believe that the old legacy of the Catholic values is, to a certain extent, influencing the emergence of new actors, such as immigrants associations.

The «policy mirror mechanism» perspective can also be seen in what we have called the *specificity* and *ad hoc* approach to social policy for immigrants. This is characterised by the adoption of both «ad hoc» and «specificity» provisions in order to cope with emerging social problems. In practice, it reveals a *reactive* policy style (Richardson, Gustafsson and Jordan, 1982), aimed at tackling specific problems, rather than advancing more comprehensive mod-

els of social policy. However, what is characteristic of local government institutions in Turin —like the Turin Town Hall— is their willingness of negotiating solutions directly with all the others public and private actors already active around specific issues, such as accommodation, health care, education etc.

From this collaborative system, however, immigrant associations are excluded, which represents a limit for further innovations. The intercultural discourse recently adopted by the Municipality as an overall integration model, does not yet appear clear in its concrete purposes. If dialogue and mutual exchange are indeed noble intentions, one still need to have some counterpart to start such a dialectic process with. Ignoring the presence of immigrants associations —i.e. the expected counterpart— which is actually the policy pursued by local administration in Turin (Caponio, 1996), does not appear a coherent move.

The «policy mirror mechanism» can also be observed when we approach the gender analysis. The majority of migrant women arrive in Italy through ethnic and family networks which shape the migratory chains. The main resources of these networks in the case of Turin seem to be their contacts and relationships with individuals positioned in third sector organisations like Caritas and Alma Mater. Through these solidarity networks, the third sector has become a possibility for informal mediation and negotiation of migrant women's access to social services, subordinated to and sometimes at the expenses of their legal status and rights.

The fact that these third sector organisations are visualised as shortcuts to social services reveals the relevant role played by informal networks and resources inside the Italian welfare system in general. This means that access to basic social rights also for Italian people mostly is perceived as a question of *who one knows* in the system, a condition which is mirrored by the experiences of foreign immigrants, and particularly migrant women, in Turin.

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