Transnational families, religious participation and gender dynamics: Filipino, Sao Tomean and Indo-Mozambican immigrant women in Lisbon, Portugal

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In addition to being the object of policy and legal initiatives, families of migrant origin have become a focus of debate concerning difference and its limits. Migrants themselves, however, are also reflecting on how to manage family relationships in a changing world in which migration is mostly transnational. This article aims to discuss the influence of religious participation on the reconfiguration of processes of family dynamics promoted by three groups of migrant women who, while settled in Lisbon, maintain transnational ties with their countries of origin and with various diasporic spaces. Guiding research questions are: to what extent does religious participation provide migrant women with connections, networks and other intangible resources? How are these resources mobilised as “bonding” and “bridging” social capitals? Can such capitals become a conduit for the redefinition of family relations and female self-narratives? Comparative analysis confirms that the three groups discussed not only mobilize religious belonging and ties to generate resources, but also convert these connections into social (and other forms of) capital, thus triggering desired changes that affect the lives of their children and families in both the short and long term. While migration does not alter long-standing patterns provided by their own respective sociocultural frames of belonging, our findings reveal that the three groups of interlocutors use religious participation to explore tactics, social capitals and mobility spaces and, further, to negotiate, without subverting, specific family inequality dynamics.

Keywords: Transnational families, religion, gender dynamics, immigrants, Portugal

Introduction

Research on the increasingly feminine character of international migratory fluxes has rendered apparent that there is a need for a stronger analytical way of relating migratory trajectories and cultural constructions of self and family (Tacoli 1999;
Pessar and Mahler 2001, 2006; Salih 2003; Erel 2009; Zontini 2010). Although these constructions are also changing in many contexts of origin, research has increasingly shown that migratory processes particularly compel migrants to rethink, re-interpret, and reconfigure their family and personal lives (Baldassar et al 2006; King et al 2006; Grillo 2008). Debates in wider society are also interacting with these redefinitions in complex ways. Increasingly, the cultural values and practices that are believed to represent family dynamics of immigrant groups in many receiving countries have not only been subjected to intense public scrutiny and contestation but also the object of policy and legal initiatives (Grillo 2008).

The strategies and meaning-making processes through which migrants can reorganize their families are mediated by their embeddedness in a multiplicity of structures besides being shaped by resources they acquire and mobilize in their everyday lives. Migrants’ very capacity of re-defining strategies and meaning stems from an intersection of gender with class, education, ethnicity and religion. As noted by authors discussing geographies of religion (Hopkins 2009; Johnson and Werbner 2010; Shin 2007), the different ways in which gender and religious experiences are mutually constituted and influence migrants’ options and strategies towards family life remain insufficiently examined.

Based on comparative research, this article aims to discuss the influence of religious participation on the reconfiguration of family relations and identity narratives promoted by three groups of migrant women who, while settled in Lisbon, maintain transnational ties with their countries of origin and with various diasporic spaces. Its guiding questions are: to what extent does religious participation provide migrant women with connections, networks and other intangible resources? How are these religious resources mobilised as “bonding” and “bridging” social capitals [1]? In
what conditions can such capitals be manipulated to achieve beneficial results? In what circumstances are they instead an obstacle which hinders or prevents the achievement of self-imposed objectives? Can such capitals become a conduit for the redefinition of family relations and female self-narratives?

**Identities, social capital, religious participation and transnational families: a theoretical framework**

Previous research recognizes that migration affects the migrants’ multifaceted identities at least in two interrelated respects (Jenkins 2004; Banton 2008): promoting external processes of identification and categorization as well as stimulating processes of renegotiation of multiple identities, as articulated and expressed by migrants in a range of specific social fields. Migratory contexts also constitute a strategic lens for understanding “under what circumstances, among whom and in order to satisfy which needs or interests, do migrant selective identifications and dis-identifications occur” (Banton 2008: 1276). Concomitantly, migration literature calls for further work on the impact of the various forms of transboundary “positional moves” (Wimmer 2008) upon the identity projects of migrant subjects and groups, on their differential trajectories of integration and of transnational participation.

The definition of identities as inter-subjective representations (of oneself, of various “us” and “others”), as well as processes that relate the construction of the value image of subjects and groups with competitive investments in social resources (Bastos and Bastos 2010), led us to integrate a social capital approach. As it is generally recognised in migration research, social networks are the origin and the result of - both individual and collective - social capital resources. Not infrequently, this equation has resulted in the assumption that more social networks means more social capital resources and, consequently, greater access to social mobility. In
contrast, unsuccessful and vulnerable trajectories are equally assumed to be lacking in social capital. However, a number of authors have already begun to reject this simplistic analysis. Following Bourdieu’s approach (Bourdieu 1977, 1986), they have interrogated the tensions between the social capital reality as a source of belonging and equality, and one of multiple power dynamics (Putnam 2000; Van Staveren and Knorringa 2007; Thieme and Siegmann 2010).

Emphasizing the role of religion to create new space-time reconfigurations and cross boundary networks (Vasquez and Marquardt 2003), available research has stressed the importance of religious networks as “social capital generators” (Levitt 2007: 151; see also Putnam 2000). The social capital resources that migrant women can access through local and transnational religious participation have also been recognized (Goulbourne et al. 2010). Some sources underline how networks and values of reciprocity based on religion may operate as platforms allowing migrant women’s social mobility (Anthias 2007; Grassi and Évora 2007). For other authors, social capitals created by faith often encourage notions about how religion should be lived and its role in society, stimulating new ways of conceptualising citizenship and mobilizing religion to social activism (Erel 2009; Trovão 2012 a).

Some recent contributions concerning transnational families also helped us to broaden the interface between identities, social capitals and religious participation. Transnational families are to be considered in relation to the organization of the world system, by which we mean a world of nation-states (Goulbourne et al. 2010). Their multi-sited placement in different national-historical contexts requires the analysis of the various contextual parameters, which contribute to the reconfiguration of the experiences of those families and their members. Simultaneously, transnational families are constructed and lived between different nation states, thereby constituting
imagined and reflexive, real and changing communities (Bryceson and Vuorela 2002). The transnational creation of shared memories, feelings of belonging, network ties, mutual obligations and consciousness over time also need to be analysed. Easily idealized as porous and cosmopolitan formations, transnational families become a heuristic focus to study both processes toward conservatism and homogenization and processes of contestation and pluralisation, as well as emergence of different forms of cultural hybridity.

**Operationalising a comparative research project**

We used a strategic comparative approach focusing on migrant women whose family values and practices can be conceived as specific socio-historical and cultural forms of three types of transnational family dynamics. Our first empirical focus was a family configuration frequently associated with transnational migrants from North Africa, the Middle East, and parts of South Asia (Gardner 2002; Salih 2003; Werbner 2004; Ballard 2008; Zontini 2010 among others). This family model often involves a strong corporate family ethos (i.e. promoting multiple or extended family relations and values, gender power inequalities, intergenerational stratification and parental control) combined with a high degree of scrutiny over the sexual and moral behaviour of women (and men) and underpinned by the belief that transgression of certain rules and principles entails shame and harm to the collective family honour.

The second focus concerned a configuration related with transnational migrants of either Afro-Caribbean origin or from certain (i.e. Creole) African societies (Barrow 1996; Chamberlain 2004, 2009; Reynolds 2005, 2006; Goulbourne et al. 2010). Men build their masculinity, prestige and power partly through the sexual and reproductive conquest of multiple women. Erotic and reproductive social capital is also exploited by young women as a key way for negotiating social mobility and
material security. However, due to the volatility of marital experiences, motherhood and mother-children relationships become the main identity investment and source of respectability for the women-mothers, who often assume total responsibility for the subsistence and education of their children.

Studied by authors exploring different aspects of transnational family life (i.e. Tacoli 1999; Asis et al. 2004; Parreñas 2005), the third chosen pattern reflects a configuration often discussed in relation to South Asian and, specifically, to Filipino migrants. One parent, frequently the mother, is absent from a residentially nuclear family, which is, significantly, functionally extended. Family relations are defined by strong reciprocity relationships, entailing moral and economic obligations with relatives that live in dispersed multi-local households. Unlike the first family arrangement, men and women contribute to the nuclear household while supporting other relatives. However, socio-cultural expectations based on gender, in tandem with advantageous standing in the international job market, assign to women accumulated responsibilities of securing their family’s wellbeing. Resembling the second family pattern, women sacrifice themselves to nurture and provide for, mostly, their children.

In order to explore the first and second models of family dynamics we chose to work with Hindu women of Indo-Mozambican origin and Christian women from São Tomé and Príncipe, a Portuguese-speaking island nation off the western coast of Central Africa. To investigate the third model, we opted for a segment of Filipino women involved in a transnational Christian congregation of Filipino origin. Settled in the Greater Lisbon area, all women we worked with can be described as active economic agents. They usually find employment in the Portuguese care and domestic service market, which favours migrant workers. Their migration processes have been shaped by specific roles and expectations regarding gender and family. Despite the
“apparent gender egalitarianism” in the division of labour in the Philippines (Zontini 2010, 200; Parreñas 2005, 327; Asis et al. 2004, 201), all the three groups incorporated discursive traditions and practices characterised by gender power inequalities.

Hindus of Indo-Mozambican origin most quickly recognised clear asymmetries between women and men within their caste and religious communities (Bastos-Trovão 2005). In the case of Sao Tomean women, although the mother-children relation acquires a higher relevance than the woman-man relation in the feminine cultural construction, the differentiated gender responsibilities are rooted in male domination idioms (Ramalho and Trovão 2010). Finally, normative gender ideologies in the Philippines prevail, not only impeding a reconstitution of roles enabled by women’s waged labour abroad but also burdening women with new and continued commitments as caretakers (Tacoli 1999; Asis et al. 2004; Parreñas 2005; Zontini 2010).

Additionally, they are all active participants and upholders of various religious networks and organizations. Some of them, mainly Filipino and Sao Tomean women, take on leadership roles and positions within the religious groups of their respective communities. As Catholics, Evangelicals and Hindus, they share the belief that agency rooted in religion constitutes a major source of personal and social change, equips them with skills for action, and increases their sense of responsibility to make use of those abilities.

A multi-actor and multi-sited methodological strategy was deployed. Migrant associations, networks and communities of worship emerged as a strategic passage for the ethnographic encounters. We conducted semi-directive biographical interviews with thirteen Filipina migrants, fifteen women from São Tomé and Príncipe and
another fifteen of Indo-Mozambican origin. [2] The interviewees were selected through snowball sampling, whilst ensuring varied profiles in terms of family dynamics and trajectories of integration and transnational participation. Comparison was guaranteed by the following topics: migratory trajectories and cultural constructions of self and family; transnational strategies to maintain family emotional and material attachments; religious networks, situated uses of religious participation, and their impact on family relations and self-narratives; experiences concerning inter-ethnic relations; matters of identity and belongingness. Empirical data were subjected to a qualitative content analysis. Since religious participation was one of the key variables, we also conducted complementary ethnographic observation in specific sites of the Greater Lisbon Area for, approximately, a year: the Sunday meetings of the “Free Believers in Christ Fellowship International” and “Couples for Christ”; the Radha Khrishna and Shiva temples; Catholic and Evangelical churches and networks known for a strong concentration of African migrants. [3]

“Devoted nannies” and “exemplary domestic workers”: Filipino migrant women in Lisbon

Despite the significant increase in Filipino work-related migratory fluxes to various Southern European countries, Portugal has only recently emerged as a destination for such groups. Resembling flows to Italy or Spain, Filipino migration to Portugal is markedly feminine and spearheaded by domestic workers. While some women arrived directly from the Philippines, others previously lived in places like Jordan, Egypt, and Israel. Many considered moving to England, France, and other European countries in the future. Notably, those who triggered chain migration followed their employers from Macau, when the Portuguese ex-colony returned to Chinese rule in 1999. Most have higher-level education and work experience in other sectors. Mixing
rural and urban backgrounds, our interviewees came from the regions of Visayas, Mindanao and, most frequently, Luzon.

Although some Filipinas may also harbour individualistic desires of “adventure” and “experiencing something else”, family-based gender roles are key forces that drive and shape migration. Women might also be compelled to move by the discontinuation of a conjugal relationship and the subsequent social stigma that separated women endure. However, reflecting the descriptions in the literature (Pe-pua 2003; Asis et al. 2004; Parreñas 2005; Nakonz and Shik 2009), the migratory move usually derives from the goal of “helping the family”, which suggests that, as Tacoli noted (1999, 663) women are expected to invest their income in domestic and family affairs more than men. Particularly as mothers at a distance, Filipinas’ migratory projects are essentially oriented to providing material comfort and “quality education” for the social mobility of their offspring.

Internationally reputed to be exemplary domestic workers (Pe Pua 2003), Filipinas are aware that their employers recognize them as “responsible”, “adjustable”, “honest”, and “hard working” maids who “don’t complain” and are “great with children”. The diplomats and other expatriates returning from Macau shared such representations among their networks in Portugal thereby contributing to carving out the Filipinas’ niche in Portugal. Conscious of their privileged standing in an ethnically competitive domestic services market, Filipinas invest in fulfilling the stereotype so as to secure employment in upper-middle class households. In a simultaneously strong yet delicate balance, Filipinas frequently develop close relationships with their female employers. Similar to the findings of Asis et al. (2004), becoming confidantes, they allow their employers a chance to vent, while
winning both a sympathetic ear and material support towards the difficulties of being “dutiful daughters” and “altruistic mothers” (Tacoli 1999).

In Macau my boss is earning good. Here, she was not able to find a good work and she is alone now, I understood. But, I ask “It is not enough, m’am. Would you mind, that I have a part-time twice a week?” She gave me her sister in Cascais. The sister then asked me if I knew a Filipina for her friend and I called the lady I had replaced in Hong Kong, before going to Macau (Mylene, 44 years old)

Although symbolic violence, long working hours, and little personal space inscribe a power axis in these “friendships with boundaries”, they constitute bridging social capital that partly operate to sustain the obligations and expectations that Filipinas foster towards their family and their solidarity networks.

“Handmaids of the Lord”: reconfigurations of maternity and conjugality at a distance

Most interviewees participated in transnational religious networks that were not only founded in the Philippines but also branched internationally along the geography of Filipino migratory flows. The Catholic Charismatic organization, whose Lisbon chapter we explore here, is called Couples for Christ (CFC). Despite welcoming members of any nationality, the Lisbon group was solely Filipino and largely female at the time of research. Founded in 2002, it comprised twenty members averaging thirty-five years of age. Although CFC subdivides members into five “ministries” organized by roles played in the family (kids; youth; singles, (male) servants and (female) handmaids of the Lord), most women integrate into the network as “handmaids of the Lord” because they are single mothers, widows, and wives whose husbands are not in Portugal.
Interlocking with the subject positions of mother, daughter, wife, and maid, becoming a handmaid further emphasizes the role of caretaker (Pe-Pua 2003). To be specific, solidarity and bonding among handmaids ultimately supports the fulfilment of such gendered roles. First, echoing the findings of others (i.e. Asis et al. 2004, 201; Nakons and Shik 2009, 32), religion figures into the ways Filipinas capitalize on their privileged access to waged work abroad, which enables them to support their family. If the backing of a Christian organization enhances a reputable standing in the international reproductive labour market, socializing with fellow handmaids provides not only access to a support infrastructure for transnational and job mobility, but also assistance for insertion in the new context of residence. Additionally, participation in the congregation helps curtail countless difficulties associated with domestic work and the dilemmas stemming from the contradictory roles of caregiver. Sharing and mutual counselling add to the evocation of Christian patience, perseverance, and acceptance to consolidate the aforementioned sacrificial ethos.

(…) And I think ‘Oh God, I am feeding another children’ [sic] and my children I couldn’t take care of them!... It’s strange. And I was crying when I was cleaning the toilet of my boss! (...) I’m feeling low! But I talk with them [CFC members] about this. We sometimes cry about it. We just tell each other to cheer up. And pray. And if I have empregada [maid] before and I am the empregada now!... I mean, I have kids. That’s the primary thing. (…) So, you know… I was doing like sacrifice. It’s how it is to be a mother. It’s always how. (Jasmin, 32 years old)

However, Filipinas’ participation in the religious network simultaneously stimulated processes of partial negotiation of responsibilities and subjectivities associated with gender roles. Given the impossibility of physical presence, various interviewees accompany their children through material maternal care and mediated
efforts to construct intimacy while delegating to God the protection and/or ultimate guidance of their offspring.

The biggest responsibility that I am having now, is the financial assistance for my kids. Of course, at the same time, to advise them. (…) But I don’t want to force them [children]. God will speak. Not me. I don’t want to interfere. I always pray that God put them in his device. And protect them. Because what can I do? I am very far from them. He is the only one who can protect them anyway. Even [if] I am there, I cannot do that. Only God alone. (...) (Rosalinda, 46 years old)

Moreover, although the congregation sustains itself in the idiom of the united family, the feminine solidarity ties do not intransigently condemn alternative reconfigurations of conjugality at a distance. Long-distance conjugality harbours several forms of engaging with “marital subjectivities” (Constable 2003) and is criticized as something that “usually happens because you are far”. Nevertheless, new relationships in the host context may be concomitant with matrimonial ties which, given legal and economic obstacles to divorce in the Philippines, often have been suspended only in practice. Some handmaids perceived relationships as “second chances”, allowing them to invest in themselves, while emphasizing individual responsibilities towards God, his divine powers and even strongly opposing divorce.

I told my boss, ‘Please, please! I want my husband to come!’ He has lots of excuses not to make the papers. [besides having committed adultery] And that’s it. I did what I had to do as a wife…I don’t think God wants me to be alone and feel sorry for myself because I am already married. (…) In this life now I had the opportunity to meet a good man: loving, caring. And I just have to move on with my life. (Maria, 32 years old)

Further reflecting the re-centring of life projects on their selves and femininities, handmaids’ partly redirect income to the acquisition of personal items (i.e. accessories, clothes, beauty products), greater privacy and comfort. Thus, assisted and
accompanied by other handmaids, most women aim at replacing the live-in regime they usually start in with various part-time jobs and a shared apartment, despite increased job instability and expenses.

Cleaners, domestic service workers, and student-workers: Sao Tomean women disillusioned by Portuguese racism

The Sao Tomean migratory biographies we studied cannot be separated from the multiple social changes that accompanied (since 1990) the period of political transition and market liberalization in São Tomé and Príncipe. Impelled to move by gender related responsibilities, their trajectories began in the regions of Pagué, Mé-Zóchi, Lobata and Caué, headed towards the capital city, and then turned to Angola and/or Portugal.

Some women arrived in Lisbon to reunite with the father of their children, with the aim of improving their family’s life. Others, younger, unmarried and childless, migrated in order to help members of their close family. Others still, single mothers, have left their children in the care of relatives and support the education of their children whether “back there” or in Portugal (when some degree of family reunification is finally achieved). Finally, others, with or without children, emigrated to further their graduate or post-graduate studies and to improve their professional and family trajectories. However, the decision to migrate is generally articulated with a larger family project, which is periodically readjusted.

Former administrative workers, teachers, healthcare staff and students, these women often only found work as cleaners in private homes or cleaning service firms. Students sometimes also became baby-sitters, call centre operators and restaurant staff. Those who do complete their degrees trust that they will achieve professional status and social mobility upon their return to São Tomé and Príncipe or Angola, due to the
rising local unemployment rate among qualified youths and the racial discrimination they perceive in Portugal. Regardless of their academic and professional skills, the underlying aspiration towards self-realization was centred upon the well-being of the family, in a project which incorporated multiple expectations and pressures from the community of origin.

The most frequent narratives indicate that the family is “numerous” and “interconnected” (according to a rationale of sharing). Children are considered “the wealth of a person” and a “long-term investment”, especially for their mothers. A high number of children from different relationships (“because Sao Tomean men have an habit of having many children, from different women”) results in growing up “almost fatherless”. The absence of the biological father, however, does not signal the absence of male role models and connections, frequently guaranteed by uncles, grandfathers, or older cousins. Mothers nonetheless are the “head of the family”, the ones who “give it all up for the benefit of their kids”, “full of strength”. Moreover, these representations also include traits of adaptability, tolerance and a wide-ranging generosity, recorded in the multiple solutions mothers must find to support their young children, the teenage pregnancies of their daughters, and in the solidarity they invariably display in providing shelter and food to family members.

Concerning their narratives of conjugality, and similarly to the situations described by Chamberlain (2009) for Afro-Caribbeans and Rodrigues (2007) for Cape Verdeans, cohabitation is prevalent: “living together”, “with a friend”. Men may have more than one female partner at the same time, while women must be serial monogamists. A “good husband” is a man who is not violent towards his wife and children, accepts the woman’s children from previous relationships, and provides them with material support. These representations justify some of the tactics deployed by
women to “secure” their husbands and fathers of their children (in competition with other potential partners or the mothers of the men’s other children), as well as the multiple forms of perpetuation of gender idioms in order to “avoid causing problems for the kids” and to postpone, as far as possible, the “shame” of the “dumped” woman. The lack of moral condemnation of informal polygamy on the part of women self-defined as practicing Christians (and educated in the ideal of marital fidelity), in addition to the “natural” way in which they accept the (so often exclusive) responsibility for the support and education of their children must be understood through the lens of particular socio-historical and cultural contexts of belonging, partially recreated in the Portuguese neighbourhoods where they live. Although belonging to different generations, Antonia and Etelvina share a common perception on this subject:

You look around and you say, my grandpa was this way, my dad was this way, and then you look at your own brother, and he has two, three, four [women]… But if I don’t mistreat my own, I won’t mistreat others either. And so you end up adjusting. (Etelvina, 48 years old)

In São Tomé, when a man avoids all that, they’ll immediately say he’s weak. They think it’s weird, because their own mothers, since very early on, tell their sons: a true man cannot be man to just one woman [sic]. (Antónia, 21 years old)

**Dignifying “Africans” and helping women-mothers: religious mobilisation for social activism**

Belonging to Christian networks was a central dimension of the daily lives of older women when they lived in São Tomé and Príncipe. The patterns and meanings of their religious-civic lives were progressively re-contextualized in Portugal. All unemployment, low-income levels, academic failure, delinquency among youths and the experience of discrimination and racism were translated into major incentives for
civic activism. According to them, acting as Christians entails higher personal responsibility and agency towards society. In parallel, their religious-civic participation cannot be dissociated from specific self-conceptions which have been developed within long-term structures of gender. As Christians – and especially as women-mothers, they take on greater responsibilities (pragmatic, educational, moral) in the development of the family-community, as well as within their own homes and extended families. As related by Madalena, who is better known as “the mother of us all” or “the mother of the estate”:

I raised seven children and seven stepchildren. (…) Those seven were from one, two, three different women. (…) I was often criticized when their father left, and they told me, ‘you’re crazy, the man dumped you with his children’ and I answered, ‘I do whatever I feel I should as a Christian and as a mother’. I have tens, hundreds of children in this neighbourhood. From São Tomé, Angola, or Guinea. I advise them as a mother, when something comes up, I tell them, watch out, see what you’re doing, behave yourself, because that’s not right, this is what’s right, you should do this or that, as a mother.” (Madalena, 63 years old)

Simultaneously, their civic responsibilities are directed towards the micro-family level, as well as towards the inter-ethnic community. The various resulting initiatives (mainly in the fields of mother, infant, and elderly care, education, and health) form part of a project of maternity that is widened in the name of the wellbeing, protection, development, and improvement of the stigmatized image of the family-neighbourhood. By reducing the distance between public and private spaces, they simultaneously take on roles which complement or substitute the reduced services provided by local authorities, and negotiate with the organizational structures which act as intermediaries with the Portuguese State. No less importantly, they also build informal multi-ethnic networks, operating both locally and beyond, at the national and
transnational level, which involve obligations and expectations of reciprocity, recognised by all members (Ramalho and Trovão 2010). As witnessed by Cristina:

> When you meet someone in need, give them a hand, that is, change society, in a different way. I drink from the Bible every day, it inspires me in my daily work with people. (Cristina, 39 years old)

Their civic-religious involvement allows them various forms of social capital, while also providing compensation for emotional and material vulnerabilities. Disappointment with their partner is compensated by the pride they feel regarding the adult life of the many children they raised (their “honest” jobs, their results in school and university), as well as the “neighbourhood children” whom they saved from prostitution, alcoholism, drugs, or prison. Investment in the mother-child relationship results in meaning and identity fulfilment, while investment in the male/female relationship guarantees neither material security nor respectability.

Simultaneously, their civic-religious careers work as models for identification within and between generations. Many young people from São Tomé and Príncipe who mobilize religion for social action confirm that their initiation was largely influenced by the lives of their mothers, aunts, or grandmothers, whom they recall as images of incomparable “strength” and generosity. They also tend to become significantly invested in those civic activities organised to prevent social marginalisation and inter-ethnic conflicts (Trovão 2012 a), both through local religious organizations and national government programmes that are frequently led by institutional agents of Catholic religious inspiration. Dissatisfied with the silencing (and/or resignation) of older women-mothers towards certain cultural patterns of gender, a number of young women, such as Maria (quoted below), plan to apply their civic-religious experience to the development of actions targeting African women, to
offer them both new subsistence and social mobility strategies to support their single-parent families:

Bringing the Word of God to and supporting African women is very important. Our goal is to help them become economically emancipated, create means of subsistence, and be able to educate their children. (Maria, 26 years old)

Crossing ethnic boundaries, working outside the family household: new challenges for Indo-Mozambican women

Indo-Mozambican women of Hindu religion are part of a long lasting diaspora. During the nineteenth century, their forefathers, mainly originating from Diu (part of the old Portuguese State of India) migrated to Mozambique. Following decolonization, the nationalisation process implemented in Mozambique and the civil war that ensued in the mid-1970s led to a peak in Indian emigration in the early 1980s. Most Hindu families chose Portugal as their destination. The integration of Portugal into the European Community (in 1986), the opportunities for professional improvement and the conditions for education and social assistance offered by the United Kingdom significantly increased the number of Indo-Mozambican families settled in London and Leicester since 2001 (Trovão 2012 b).

For the hundreds of families who still reside in Lisbon, the last decade was marked by unprecedented change. Women are no longer economically inactive agents. Their entry into the labour market (especially in the cleaning and domestic work sector) was an adaptation strategy to the unemployment or the precarious professional situation of men (husbands and sons) as a result of a prolonged labour crisis in the Portuguese construction industry. Mobilizing their religious networks, the pioneers began to work as housemaids for “richer” Indian families (from various
other parts of Gujarat, belonging to different castes and professionally involved in trade). They rapidly realized that this was the “most underpaid” and “humiliating” option, and therefore, one to avoid. The comparison of their experiences with other women working in domestic services (natives and immigrants) led them to target certain “rights” that “Indian employers”, usually, did not satisfy. Supported by inter-ethnic neighbourhood networks, they began to prefer “bagli [white]” female employers, or “the doctors, as we call them”. Other factors, such as the opportunity to make contact with new lifestyles, the “trust” that they were earning (as nannies and caregivers of the elderly in particular), the “respect” for their religious difference (being dispensed from cooking beef and from work on several religious holidays) and, above all, the feeling of being “treated like family members” reinforced their option.

While avoiding confronting their male partners with the current failure of their gender-based responsibilities, these women gain an increased negotiating power against the constant pressures of the kin, caste, and ethno-religious community networks. They also win access to spaces, fields, networks and social intercultural capital, which offer new possibilities (albeit compartmentalized) to express their own selves and construct alternative conceptions of the social world. In situations of extreme marital dissatisfaction, female economic autonomy enables some women to separate from their husbands (without pursuing a divorce), become the head of their domestic groups, or embark on a new migration project (preferably in the U.K.). Their life-stories show how the start of paid work marks a turning point in the process of self-construction. Anju and Darsha’s words provide us a personal reflection on this:

When my mother in law and my sisters in law poison my husband against me, I can answer back. I say it quietly, to avoid creating resentment. I bring the bread you all eat. Do not mess with my life. (Darsha, 32 years old)
Before, I was very scared. I had to ask my husband’s permission to visit my family or to go to the mandir (temple). And it wasn’t just me, all our women were like that. Now the husbands cannot mistreat us. Those who still drink and beat their wives are setting up their own fall. (Anju, 47 years old)

In addition to linguistic and communicational skills, the relationship with their employers conveys knowledge on the working of Portuguese institutions as well as a certain ability to network beyond one’s ethno-religious community. Influenced by some of the values of the Portuguese middle class, some women have been promoting a less-differentiating gender pattern regarding their offspring’s development of academic skills. In parallel, efforts towards bi-referential (cultural) subjectivities have been gradually integrated into their reproductive performances. As Laxmi puts it:

My project is for them to be well versed in Portuguese and Indian cultures so they may be at ease wherever they are, and always match up to the people they may meet. This gives them great opportunities to be exposed to different realities (Laxmi, 36 years old)

Their daily contact with non-Indian families also tends to deactivate a number of enunciation and sociability tactics conventionally deployed in cultures of relatedness. This results in unique conditions for telling their employers “secrets” that they would never reveal to co-ethnics; for the confession of one’s own transgressions; for the accusation towards others; and for expressing alternative forms of narrating the self. Urmila synthesizes her positioning in the community and the way she faces the set of inner social norms:

In my community, when two sisters-in-law, or a daughter and mother-in-law are always together and speak positively, that does not mean they’re true friends. When someone wants to hurt another, they usually become their friend, so that the other won’t be suspicious. With my [female] employer, I tell her things no one else knows, that I’d never tell people in my community (Urmila, 45 years old).
Redefining the otherness of the other: powers of Hindu motherhood

Indo-Mozambican women are not only a dynamic force behind the reconstruction and transmission of Sanathan Dharm Hinduism; they also officiate (within their homes) religious performances that are traditionally carried out by male specialists. Apart from this ritual specialization, they recreate ‘Little Traditions’[4] and direct means of communication with the Hindu goddesses through possession. Emphasising the incorporative, metamorphic and porous nature of all beings, as well as the fluid, mutable and reversible relations between them, their expressive repertoire (Bastos-Trovão 2005) was crucial for their integration within the Portuguese care and domestic services market.

Jaia revealed to us how she turned to her long-lasting *vrata katha* practice when she began to work as a cleaning lady. Requiring the cyclic telling of a tale together with the observance of several ascetic practices, *vrata* ritualizations explain situations of family crisis as the result of an excessive desire for upward social mobility or as the abusive use of hierarchizing distinctions. In turn, crises’ reparation is often assigned to subordinate figures (female, such as herself) and implies the restoration of interdependence among asymmetrical positions or an open stance towards apparently repulsive figures (e.g. foreigners). Jaia’s belief in the power of these tales allowed her to attribute new meanings to tasks she experienced as “humiliating”. Two years later, her “devotion” made it possible for her to accumulate sufficient economic power to organize her eldest daughter’s marriage.

Manorma disclosed how, in the recent past, she had been “very proud”. Manorma’s *vrata katha* experience, however, led her to question her own pride and condemn inter-ethnic closure. She despised her younger sisters-in-law because they worked for non-Indian female employers. When her husband became unemployed,
she was offered a job taking care of an elderly couple. She refused. Next month, her son also lost his job. As she explained, impermeable boundaries are a mere illusion (dependent on maya, the divine power to delude):

At that time, I was so desperate. I had no money. My husband was unemployed. But I always refused to work as a cleaning lady. Ma (mother goddess) brought that old woman to test me. Today, I call her mother, and she calls me daughter (Manorma, 43 years old)

The representation of the female body as a privileged locus for the manifestation of divine power is very frequently assumed by Portuguese Hindus. This symbolic power can be used to renegotiate the conviction of certain unequal relations. One interesting consequence is the apparent neutralisation (to a certain degree) of idioms of domination over women. In parallel, by admitting the possibility that “Indians could be possessed by Whites’ and Blacks’” spirits, possession proposes an anti-binary conception for inter-ethnic relations (Bastos-Trovão 2005).

My mother-in-law put those things into his head. Who has ever heard of a husband kneeling before his wife? (...) One day, the wife of my husband's boss, a rich bagli (white) called me. She had much faith and she was healed. Only after that my family believed. (Motibai, 37 years old)

**Changing family experiences, making the self: a gendered view of religious participation**

To summarise, the lives of Filipino women, with religious congregations at their core, provide them with material, informational, emotional, and discursive resources that support and guarantee the conjugation of their productive and reproductive responsibilities. Through religious communal participation, they accumulate bonding social capital, which they use and capitalize upon as a bridge towards high-middle class segments of Portuguese society. A significant sense of collective identity (ethnic and religious), combined with strong bonding social capital, seems to act as a
precursor to bridging social capital, determining their successful and distinctive insertion in the Portuguese job market and, consequently, the realization of identity objectives subjacent to their migratory process.

In a similar manner, the religious participation of Sao Tomean women allows them to access spaces, skills, and different kinds of social capital. Although the experience of racism constitutes an important factor to understand the differential insertion of these women and their families, their religious capitals include some potential for change. Most clearly, accumulated resources act as a platform that can support upward social mobility in the emerging generations, especially when - as practising Catholics or Evangelists - women convey the sacred values of family and marital fidelity and instil the importance of academic and professional training in their offspring.

Indo-Mozambican women manipulate resources generated by religion, in particular idioms that emphasize that ethnic and racial boundaries are only apparently intrinsic, fixed or irreversible, to build and maintain bridging social capitals. By redefining the otherness of the other, they are able to transform symbolic capital into social capital and, by extension, to turn both into the economic capital required by their families. Moreover, they partially alter long lasting dynamics of investment and capitalization of symbolic capital based on gender imbalances. [5]

Comparative ethnography has mainly brought to light the positive effects of bonding religious ties on the recreation of bridging capital associated with the achievement of gender responsibilities (cf. Table 1). Along with providing material resources, these capitals contribute to the preservation of gender, family and cultural values, thus guaranteeing the continuity and reconfiguration of normative identities. Although adverse effects of ethno-religious participation have been noted (primarily
connected with mimetic and loyalty pressures, and strong network control), the comparative analysis suggests that a diversified repertoire of bridging and bonding social capitals rooted in religion allows invisible and incomplete identity negotiations.

In the Filipinas’ case, as the productive role accrues to the reproductive one, normative gender expectations are maintained and extended to justify the practice of transnational mothering as an acceptable construction of the self. Further allowing transformations in the way gender roles are subjectively constructed and negotiated social capitals favour compatibility with a greater concern with oneself. Similarly, these capitals are compelling Indo-Mozambican women to reinterpret gendered and ethnicized values, while promoting the (intergenerational) elaboration of bi-cultural identities. For Sao Tomean women, although transnational co-maternity is legitimized by pre-migratory practices of co-parental care and child shifting, they can sustain various forms of religious participation in civil society capable of creating and maintaining socially constructive identity ties.

Answering the question of how do such capitals become a conduit for the redefinition of self-narratives entails considering specific processes of “making the self” (Erel 2009) socio-historically and culturally mediated. The religious participation of the Filipino interviewees does not seem to affect self-idioms that operate precisely as a condition to the development of feminine migratory trends. Possibly diverging from deeper investigations, our ethnography suggests that the fulfilment of individualistic objectives (Zontini 2010) invites a closer analysis of the intertwined relationship between feminine self and moral agency articulated by long-standing Filipino ethical traditions. Similarly, the civic-religious activities of Sao Tomean women are not motivated by socio-religious ideals of male-female equality. Converging with studies examining various African contexts (Oyewumi 2004), it is
the differential function — which we have designated as expanded maternal function — that confers and strengthens the statute and possibility of self-realization to the feminine subject. As discussed above, Indo-Mozambican migrant women mobilize a contra-ethnicising religious resource to legitimize the various forms of cross-boundary “positional moves” (Wimmer 2008) demanded by their productive functions. These crossings allow them to construct new subjectivities and forms of narrating the self, the community of belonging and their multiple others. However, they cannot be interpreted as a self-project in opposition to cultural and religious traditions.

The potential impact of some compositional factors (age, length of stay in Portugal, and academics capitals) - namely in the two groups presenting greater heterogeneity - also requires a concluding remark. Like their Mozambican mothers, younger Hindu women born in Portugal recognise that the family asymmetries within their community do not accord with the surrounding patterns. Many women - educated in secondary Portuguese schools - have succeeded in making professional plans (other than domestic services) in the UK. In what concerns gender idioms, however, they usually accept the values of their religious networks. Similarly, the religious-civic lives of young Sao Tomean women who hold higher social and academic capitals, and whose narratives often try to combine the values of “the old days” with “progressive” ideals, continue to be motivated by children’s provision and upbringing and by the will to help African women-mothers in the same circumstances.

If we conceive of religious female agency not only as a synonym of resistance, subversion, and perpetuation of power structures (Johnson and Werbner 2010, 212), then what seems more meaningful is the way our three groups of interlocutors use
religion to explore tactics, social capitals and mobility spaces and, further, to negotiate specific gender inequality relations without subverting them. Moreover, their capacity for action, which is developed in relation to their fellow countrymen and countrywomen’s gendered constructions and practices (including those mediated by religious experiences), can both bring emotional gratifications and be menacing for different groups of men and women, since different identity interests are at stake (Hopkins 2009; Johnson and Werbner 2010). Paraphrasing their own voices, self-distanciation from and against significant peers also produces particularly acute vulnerabilities and emotional sufferings for women who define themselves as family subjects.

**Table 1: Religious participation and family dynamics in three groups of immigrant women**

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Strategic comparison</th>
<th>Filipino women</th>
<th>São Toméan women</th>
<th>Indo-Mozambican women</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td>Incorporation in the Portuguese labour market</td>
<td>. Care and domestic service . Continuity of the productive role . Divergence between professional occupation and educational level . Positive perception of work (high and stable income) . Regular remittance sending practices</td>
<td>. Cleaning and domestic jobs . Continuity of the productive role . Divergence between professional occupation and educational level . Negative perception of work (especially among younger women) . Occasional remittances sending (depending on economic availability)</td>
<td>. Domestic service . Discontinuity (from previous situation of reproductive exclusivity) . Undesirable but gradually valued work . Remittance sending responsibility falls with males</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Religious participation and social capital resources</td>
<td>. Active participants and members of transnational congregations . Bonding religious and social capital as a</td>
<td>. Active participants and members of local and transnational Church groups</td>
<td>. Active participants in Sanathan Dharm Hinduism and “Little” traditions</td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>
| **precursor to bridging social capital**  
| . Bridging social capital as guarantor of economic capital to maintain social positioning and to sustain bonding symbolic capital (investment in oneself) | **Bonding religious capital is used as a bridge to fight against the experience of differential racism** | **Symbolic resources as precursors to bridging social and economic capital** |
| **Changing family relations**  
| . New forms of motherhood and conjugality resulting from distance  
| . Expectations of family reunion in the distant future (after children’s education)  
| . Experimentations with new conjugal relationships in the host country  
| . Maintenance of transnational family networks | **At-a-distance maternal role, followed by short/medium term reunion (mother-children)**  
| . Female single-parent domestic groups with support from family members and co-ethnics  
| . Construction of transnational family networks | **Reconstruction of values and practices of extended and multiple family**  
| . Trend towards nuclear residential domestic groups  
| . Multi-secular diasporic family networks |
| **Gender roles and responsibilities**  
| . Gender egalitarianism (in the division of labour within the household)  
| . Gender asymmetries (sacrificial feminine ethos)  
| . Self oriented goals | **Gender inequality (women having the responsibility of raising and supporting their children)**  
| | **Less divided gender responsibilities**  
| . Gender asymmetries based on patriarchal and gerontocratic family values |
| **Identity impacts**  
| . Significant sense of collective (ethnic and religious) identity  
| . Cross-boundary sensibility (participation in Portuguese families and closeness to female employers and children)  
| . Investment in oneself | **Significant sense of collective (ethnic and religious) identity**  
| . Emphasis on devout citizenship as an agency capable of creating inter-ethnic identity bonds  
| . Higher self-esteem, family and community respect | **Significant sense of collective (caste and ethno-religious) identity**  
| . Cross-boundary sensibility  
| . More self-esteem and family respect |
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Notes

1. According to Putman (2000, 23) “bridging social capital can generate broader identities and reciprocity, whereas bonding social capital bolsters our narrower selves. (…) bonding and bridging are not «either-or» categories into which social networks can be neatly divided, but «more or less» dimensions along which we can compare different forms of social capital.”

2. In 2010, the national authority controlling border crossing and entrance into Portugal (SEF) estimated the presence of 540 Filipinos (129 men and 411 women) and recorded 10,495 Sao Toméan (4,751 men and 5,744 women). These numbers conflict with those provided by the honorary consul of the Philippines (at minimum 3,000) and by the São Tomé and Príncipe Embassy (about 15-18,000). The Indo-Mozambicans have Portuguese citizenship and the Portuguese Constitution forbids the counting of ethnically or religiously groups. We can estimate that currently 7,000 Hindus of Mozambican origin live in Portugal.

3. We opted to use pseudonyms in the quotes that follow for the sake of preserving the interviewees’ anonymity. In the following sections we will also be quoting words and expressions taken from the interviews.

4. The notion is evoked in brackets to emphasize that women’s expressive traditions are often described as ‘lower’ than scriptural Hinduism, at least by certain Brahmanised sectors.

5. In the distant and recent past, the investment by men in the symbolic capitals of women’s honour and religious power was frequently transformed into social capital. Female agency was a source of accumulation of network-based capital, which however women only rarely mobilized or capitalized upon their symbolic-religious belonging, either individually or in a shared form.
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