

Moving Through Community Networks. Social Capital and Integration Strategies in the Moroccan Community in Italy

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- **Third Conference “Diversity in cities: Visible and invisible walls”**, 11-12 September 2007, UCL, London, UK. Contact person: Valeria Papponetti, valeria.papponetti@feem.it
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This batch of papers has been presented at the Third Conference “Diversity in cities: Visible and invisible walls”

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Summary

This paper seeks to describe the nature of the relationship between the social networks of a relatively young immigrant community – the Moroccan community in Italy - and the community's capability to devise strategies aimed at facilitating its members' integration in a host country. Community social networks were observed as information sources, socializing opportunities, and symbolic dimension. A number of nodes of the community networks were observed and three main typologies of community networks identified: extended family networks, "adapted" networks, and "adopted" networks. Despite the perception of community members, who complain about a lack of solidarity between them, research findings indicate that community networks, besides actively contributing to strengthening community members' sense of identity, are vital and strong enough to absorb and mitigate the hardest and most painful effects brought by the migration experience. While more "formal" networks (e.g., Moroccan associations) provide evidence of Moroccan migrants' strong will to perform an active role in the majority society, informal networks managed at community level prove to be quicker and more reliable than mainstream society in responding to the precise needs expressed by its members, thus highlighting a problem of trust with regards to the host society.

Keywords: Migrant Communities, Morocco, Italy, Social Networks, Social Capital, Integration Strategies

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Moving Through Community Networks. Social Capital and Integration Strategies in the Moroccan Community in Italy

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1. Conceptual framework and methodology

This paper is based on the findings of a research carried out by the Psychoanalytic Institute for Social Research ([IPRS](#)) in the framework of the project “Community Force” funded by the European Commission – [DG Employment, Social Affairs & Equal Opportunities](#), in the [Social Inclusion](#) Programme. The research was aimed at exploring the inner “force” that ethnic communities can utilize in order to set aside the risks of marginality and poverty. Given this framework, the primary scope of the research was strictly linked to its practical implications; the outputs were expected to generate a number of recommendations that could possibly be utilized by policy makers when elaborating strategies for the social inclusion of ethnic minorities.

In Italy, the research focused on the Moroccan migrant community and included field research in two cities, Turin and Rome. The conceptual framework from which the research initially moved included a network analysis perspective combined with social capital theories. The initial question concerned the role of social capital in the process of immigrant integration and implied the awareness that the concepts on which social capital theory is based have rarely been translated into practices in the past.

Moving from Putnam’s (2000) distinction between *bonding* and *bridging* social capital, the research sought to analyse the Moroccan community existing social networks as they are effectively lived and experienced by Moroccan migrants. Following Putnam’s theory, trust is the core concept – or, as Wallman¹ (2004) puts it, the “missing piece” enabling the conversion “from connectedness into social capital”. The main stress of our research was not on the identification of all potential social networks within the community, but rather on the networks effectively ‘utilized’ by community members in order to overcome the hardships of the migration experience and/or foster the development of the community.

However, we should not forget that the community’s social capital is not the only condition determining the quality of a migrant community’s integration process. Legislative and social protection measures set up by the host society are among the primary conditions that can heavily influence the way in which a certain minority can “use” its social capital. For example, the acquisition of Italian citizenship is still based on *jus sanguinis* and this fact cannot be regarded as having no implications in the process of integration of immigrant citizens in the country.

Through the in-depth interviews and two introductory focus groups conducted in two cities (Rome and Turin), a map of the community ‘operational’ networks was drawn. This map resulted from a combination of all potential networks identified (outsider’s point of view), with the effective use the interview participants make of such networks and the meaning they assign to those networks, according to their own words (insider’s point of view). It should be highlighted however that, due to the snowball technique used to make new contacts, most of our interviewees can be

¹ Sandra Wallman (2004) defines social capital in the following terms: “...It is neither a network of contacts waiting inert, like money, to be hoarded or spent or invested, nor is it the automatic outcome of people with something in common getting together. The piece missing from both definitions is the meaning which people (...) put into the web which links them. Specifically, the missing piece is trust. (...) Trust has to be invested to convert connectedness into social capital”.

considered as “privileged” members of the community – namely, gatekeepers - in that they mostly had successful migratory histories, speak good to excellent Italian and are actively involved in civic society. Thus, they cannot be considered as representing the whole community but only part of it – presumably the most “advanced” share in terms of social participation and interaction with the majority of the community. However, while in Rome all of our informants belonged to this “privileged” sphere, the interviews carried out in Turin included a more heterogeneous range of informants.

As it frequently happens with research carried out in multicultural contexts, the identification of the boundaries of an ethnic community is not an easy task. In our case it was decided that, since we were speaking of a relatively young migrant community, the nationality benchmark would be taken as a criteria for defining the (imaginary) borders of such community of people. The reasons for this choice lied on the fact that, although it is quite a questionable concept from many points of view, nationality often plays a central role in determining the routes and modalities of the migratory paths as well as in influencing the settlement process in the host country. Nationality can be seen as implying certain features considered to be “objective” both by people who belong to that community and by those who do not. Passports are an example of such objective features. Although they only reveal the individual’s ‘official’ identity, passports contribute to the building of an ‘imagined political community’ (Anderson 1983). From a very practical perspective, it is nationality (passports), as well as the overall national institutional system and bureaucratic machinery, that makes the real difference among the various migrant communities in terms of eligibility for entering the host country or prolonging one’s stay there (for example, documents and requirements may vary substantially according to nationality). The national institutional system creates its own channels and modes, both formal and informal, which all migrants have to consider in the moment when they are making the decision to leave as well as along their migratory and integration paths once in the host country. This holds true for both “legal” and “illegal”, or undocumented, migrants. For example, formal agreements between governments (such as the one made between Italy and Libya) trace a “legal path” and at the same time an “illegal path” for migrants. The option to turn to the national embassy and/or consulate regarding personal “official” identity (e.g. passport loss or expiry) or in case of emergencies (e.g. war or natural disasters) represents one more example of how such “significant ties” are inevitably created in a community’s network according to nationality.

In this sense, and limited to the ‘official’ identity, these ties are shared by all people belonging to that national group, regardless of the culture (language, practices, symbols) of origin – and in this sense only it is possible to look at Moroccan migrants as belonging to *one* specific community. This does not impede however that within this national community many different ‘micro-communities’ exist – not all of them accessing the same social networks, nor sharing the same strategies for integrating with the majority society.

2. The Moroccan community in Italy: an overview

In principle, when doing research on migrant communities in Italy it is important to consider the relatively short history of immigration in the country. In fact, although the Moroccan community is one of the oldest immigrant settlements in Italy and can count today on an increasing number of second generation children, the community’s adult population is still largely formed by first generation immigrants.

When referring to the Moroccan community in Italy it is therefore important to keep in mind that, as a young community, its boundaries have not been clearly defined yet and its identity, as well as forms of memberships within it, is still taking shape. However, research findings suggest that this still undefined status of the community, far from representing a constraint, is sometimes experienced as an asset.

Together with the Albanian and the Romanian communities, the Moroccan community represents one of the largest national minorities in Italy and can be considered today as being permanently established there. Two indicators above all help measure the status of the Moroccan community: the number of females, which recently grown to be over 40% of the total community; and the significantly large number of second generation children of Moroccan origins attending Italian schools. As far as employment is concerned, migrants of Moroccan origin notably stand out for their self-employment and entrepreneur skills². In particular, Moroccan-born citizens represent the first national group, among foreign-born citizens, who founded an individual enterprise in Italy. In the period 2000-2005, the percentage of enterprises owned by Moroccan-born individuals nearly tripled (+189,2%)³. Although we are aware that these data only depict part of the whole picture (the figures do not specify what is considered to be an “individual enterprises”; street vendors, for example, are included among them), still it can reveal something of the strategy of an ethnic community, especially if compared to other migrant communities in Italy. Lastly, one less typical indicator, although very significant in terms of social capital, is particularly notable with regards to the Moroccan community: the large number of Moroccan associations currently existing in Italy.

3. Which community?

Although our research was not specifically aimed at investigating into Moroccan migrants' perception of a community, many interesting inputs to this regard did indirectly emerge from the interviewees' comments. Ambiguity seems to be the attitude that mostly characterizes Moroccan migrants' perception of their community. Especially in Rome, many interviewees would display reluctance to perceive themselves as part of the “big whole” represented by the Moroccan community. To make this distance clear, they would use the personal pronoun “they” when referring to the Moroccan community in general. On the other hand, despite distancing from the community, the same interviewees would not hide their satisfaction, sometimes their pride, in “being a Moroccan”. This was done sometimes explicitly, other times implicitly by using a number of adjectives and positive stereotypes when describing Moroccans. In addition, all interviewees seemed to coincide in viewing Moroccan immigrants as very skilled and full of initiative – which is commonly regarded as the main feature characterizing their national group and is also how they explain themselves the fact that many of them have a successful migration history. However, this outstanding entrepreneur skill is commonly perceived as a constraint to community cohesion, as repeatedly stressed by most interviewees, since it leads to a lack of cooperation between community members, and this is in turn perceived as the most serious constraint to a full development of community resources for the community's benefit.

Many interviewees expressed annoyance and sometimes even intolerance towards elements that they believe to be the causes of the community's marginalization, poverty and discrimination (eg: disagreement and lack of cooperation between community members). On the other hand, ideas and projects concerning the future of the community (e.g. the *Confederation of Moroccan Associations in Italy*, which will be addressed later), reveal the existence of an ideal “imagined community” that serves to shorten the symbolical distance between the culture of origin and that of adoption.

In conclusion, the Moroccan community in Italy is viewed by its members as a resourceful community, one that can count on skilled and qualified individuals. Nevertheless, such richness is

² According to the official data provided by the Ministry of Interior (Year 2004), 14,8% of all Permits to Stay issued for Employment to Moroccan citizens are for Self-Employment.

³ The main business areas of such enterprises are, firstly, trade and selling activities (26,684 enterprises), followed by building (4,751), transportation (1,866) and manufacturing (1,092). Moroccan-born citizens' enterprises working in the agricultural area are very scarce (only 113). Source: Unioncamere-Infocamere 2003

often viewed to go wasted due to disagreements and a lack of cooperation between community members. As a consequence, the resources are dispersed. It seems therefore correct to state that the community itself is seen as the main constraint to its development.

4. Moroccan community social networks

Community networks can be both formal and informal⁴ and can symbolically extend the community's boundaries from the local reality to the whole Italian territory and reach the country of origin as well as other destination countries in Europe. These networks include resources and nodes providing Moroccan migrants with information and logistic support, socializing opportunities, and an essential symbolic dimension. As most interviewees stated, most information is transmitted "by word of mouth" - a mechanism which provides evidence of the existence and the vitality of the community's social networks. Likewise, all existing informal nodes and networks of information as well as some of the strategies devised collectively demonstrate how, in the interviewees' words, the perception of "being a Moroccan" is quite alive and plays an essential role in shaping migrants' social identity in Italy. We can conclude that, notwithstanding the lack of an "official" sense of the community, an informal sense of Community does exist among Moroccan migrants. However, as mentioned above, some broad groups can be identified that make up distinctive micro-communities within the Moroccan community of migrants in Italy. Each of these groups reflects different cultural and communication codes as well as diverse migration projects and relies on its own social/information network.

Generally speaking, community social networks display three main functions: a) providing information; b) creating socializing opportunities; c) feeding a symbolic dimension. Material as well as psychological support, undoubtedly important functions of social networks, proceed from the three former functions. On this base, three main typologies of social networks were identified within the Moroccan community: (i) Extended family networks; (ii) 'Adapted' networks; and (iii) 'Adopted' networks.

(i) Extended family networks represent the smallest reliable unit of all the community networks, but may extend well over the host country's borders, bridging immigrants with the homeland on one hand, and with other countries in Europe where other family members may reside, such as France or Spain, on the other hand. Traditionally, the extended family represents not only an informal network where individuals are guaranteed lifelong protection, but also an extended set of (mostly unspoken) codes and rules where nothing is left to chance (for example, families always designate someone who is expected to take care of an orphan or a widow in case of the death of a male family member). Within this network, women play a key role. Therefore, when investigating the networks, the resources and the strategies of the Moroccan community in Italy, it is important to consider the centrality of the extended family as it is predictable that individuals migrating will symbolically bring this core function with them and they will re-shape it, distance themselves from it or create new trans-national networks to keep it alive.

(ii) 'Adapted' networks are namely networks that existed prior to the decision to migrate and the experience of migration. Similarly to some extended family networks, these networks and all ties within them "migrate" along with people and adapt their original structure to the new situations created by the efforts of insertion within the Italian society. Within the wider community network founded on national origins, adapted networks seemingly represent one basic principle for alliances beyond the extended family. They consequently play the role of a precious resource in case of need of any kind (practical, financial or just for information).

⁴ In this paper we define as "formal" those social networks that were created consciously and with some specific purpose; "informal" networks, on the contrary, refer to social networks that arose through a series of spontaneous interactions and do not have a specified objective.

Adapted networks are formed upon the idea of differently characterized shared origins and can give way to multiple, smaller migratory chains that tend to re-create in the destination country a social environment that resembles as much as possible the one left at home. In most cases, these origins involve a geographical criteria: there seems to be a direct connection between city/area of origin in Morocco and city/area of destination in Italy. Many Moroccan immigrants in Turin, for instance, come from the city of Khouribga and the surrounding area. From this point of view Rome, according to our interviewees, stands out as an exception, attracting and gathering Moroccans from all over the country, although a slight predominance of Casablanca-immigrants may be found.

However, adapted networks may also recall other types of origins, the most relevant of which seem to be the rural vs. urban origins. Some interviewees suggested there is a direct connection between rural origins in Morocco and the choice of rural destinations in Italy. Most Moroccan immigrants working in the agricultural sector far from the largest metropolitan areas and who are mostly employed purely on a seasonal basis, come from rural areas, whereas immigrants coming from urban areas are more likely to settle in urban areas. According to some of our interviewees, migrants of rural origins are commonly believed to have stronger and more reliable social networks.

One more criteria for the creation of alliances on the basis of one's origins in Morocco, is the Arab versus Berber origins. Particularly in Turin, the distinction between Berber and Arab origins is perceived within the Moroccan community as a barrier obstructing communication between the two groups. In addition, it is worth noticing that according to the majority of our interviewees the type of origins at home (Berber/Arab; urban/rural; etc.) can strongly influence the type of occupation they will do as immigrants.

(iii) 'Adopted' networks. By this expression we intend to refer to those networks that did not exist as such prior to departure from the country of origin. One example concerns the criteria underlying housing in the country of adoption. While in the home country housing is mostly conceived with family members only (especially in rural areas), the migration experience forces many migrants to share a flat with non-family members chosen on the basis of "new" criteria, such as friendship relations or economic convenience, and thus opening to the possibility to establish new ties and alliances⁵.

However, the most outstanding example of networks that have been generated by the migration experience and are sometimes created in response to the needs of the young migrant community, is Moroccan associations in Italy. According to our interviewees, associations as a means of participating in the political life of a country, are a relatively recent development in Morocco. This is particularly true in urban areas, where civic awareness is rapidly increasing and associations are growing accordingly as a result. Given the recentness of these changes, it is amazing to discover that a surprisingly high number of associations are founded by Moroccan migrants in Italy.

Studies focalizing on social capital normally consider the capability to create associations and the number of associations effectively founded as important indicators of social capital. In fact, besides representing the community itself to the majority population, associations can be viewed as reflecting the community's vitality and initiative as well as shed a light on the capability of community members to organize themselves and pursue specific objectives collectively, as one community.

⁵ Alzetta (2006) suggests that the recent "new wave" of Moroccan migrants (mostly comprised of young, urban and educated migrants, including many educated women as well), has reinforced the rupture of more traditional rules governing housing and contributed to the creation of brand new networks.

Highlighting that Moroccans represent one of the national groups that has founded the highest number of associations in Italy is certainly noteworthy. However, it is also important to point out that precise numbers are not easy to find, since many of these associations are not officially registered and thus suffer of scarce visibility. Furthermore, Moroccan associations are subjected to great economic instability and as a result they are created and closed down very easily, adding to the uncertainty about numbers. According to a study conducted on this issue in Northern Italy⁶, Moroccan associations are frequently characterized by features seemingly in contrast with an idea of “civic participation”. Such features include: self-promoted presidents and vertical management; scarce activities and low involvement of the local community; and Moroccan nationality as a primary condition for admission.

Given these premises, it should not surprise to find that the most common feeling shared by our interviewees with regards to associations is mistrust. Many interviewees agreed that, far from reflecting the community’s strength, the great number of associations founded by Moroccan migrants reveals instead the weakness and instability of the community, since a cohesive community would not need that large number of different associations to be represented. In particular, to the eyes of the well educated immigrant of urban origin, associations primarily reflect the greed of association presidents (all too often self promoted) to gain prestige and authority within the community. From the point of view of immigrants of rural origin, on the other hand, associations are the expression of a certain privileged cultural environment – namely, the urban environment – that does not reflect their own needs and are consequently regarded with mistrust.

Nevertheless, and despite diffused criticism concerning both the lack of support from mainstream society and the lack of organization at the community level, some attempts to mobilize as a community are indeed being made. One good example is provided by the *Confederation of Moroccan Associations in Italy*, which clusters more than 150 associations founded by Moroccan citizens all over Italy. Beyond the Confederation’s primary purpose of presenting the whole Moroccan community as a trustworthy political subject within the setting of the majority community, other secondary functions acquire relevance as well. For example, one of the most significant efforts of the Confederation consists in the creation of a network at the national level (of the majority community) that connects all members of the Confederation and guarantees information exchange on a daily basis. Through this network, all members of the Confederation throughout Italy are in touch on a daily basis; experiences and ideas can be exchanged easily and everybody is informed about initiatives and activities taking place in other cities. Although its members are aware that the Confederation “*does not represent all Moroccan people in Italy*” and that it “*does not count much for people of the community*”, its founders strongly believe in the necessity of having an institutional figure representing the community to institutions of the majority population. Furthermore, in the eyes of the Confederation’s members – who constitute a selected network cutting across all other community networks previously described in this report – the Confederation itself is seen also as a precious resource they can turn to when in need. Finally, it is worth to mention that since its creation in 2004, the Confederation has had a multiplier effect leading to the foundation of two more confederations of Moroccan associations in Italy.

5. Information channels, socializing opportunities and symbolic needs

When seeking for logistic information (e.g., how to search for housing or for a job or how to obtain/renew documents), several sources and networks are available to the Moroccan immigrant in Italy. Although “official” information desks managed by the majority community do exist in most cities (examples include the Information Offices run by many Municipalities, including Turin and

⁶ Borri, S. “Le reti associative dei cittadini marocchini residenti in Lombardia”, in *Il migrante marocchino come agente di sviluppo e di innovazione nelle comunità di origine*. UE Research Project Final Report, 2002

Rome, or the Office for Foreigners at the CGIL trade union in Turin), still many people within the Moroccan community prefer to turn to more informal and sometimes less reliable channels, but managed by community members.

The majority of the logistic information within the community continues to be transmitted through informal channels. *“Passing the word, it’s all passing the word”*- such has been the answer most frequently heard from our interviewees in response to questions on this issue. While extended family networks and some of the ‘adapted’ networks based on shared origins can represent the privileged source of information for newly arrived immigrants, older migrants may rely on other channels, too, in order to gather useful information for their daily lives. Such channels are comprised of a number of sites that can be identified as nodes of the networks and have a crucial relevance since they serve diverse functions at a time. For example, small translating agencies owned by Moroccans in Turin, similarly to money-transfer agencies or phone-call centres in Rome, provide bureaucratic and legislative information, including information on how to obtain or renew Italian documents, how to enrol children in Italian schools, or how the public Italian health system works. Moreover, these agencies may sometimes informally act as intermediaries, thus effectively facilitating the bureaucratic procedures for customers. In addition, informal logistic information, as well as a hand in compiling bureaucratic procedures, may be also obtained from certain individuals directly. These individuals, whom we can define as “logistic mediators”, are members of the community and are well known within its boundaries but especially within each micro-community. They have organized themselves so as to make their living by providing information and are certainly to be considered as gatekeepers of the community. From the point of view of a Moroccan immigrant searching for information on the Italian bureaucratic procedures, the choice to turn to such places seems quite logical, since he/she knows he/she will find a friendly and comfortable environment there, will not be asked for explanations nor justifications, and will be able to speak his/her native language or dialect and make use of familiar communication codes and gestures. In a word, what these environments convey is trust.

In addition to responding to migrants’ information needs, the community social networks contribute to creating socializing opportunities for community members. This function is an asset especially for the adult population – which in Italy essentially coincides with first generation migrants – who often complain that the Moroccan community lacks proper socializing spaces, due to a lack of political will among the Municipality and local authorities, particularly in Rome. While most active members, including many associations and the Confederation, are mobilizing through more institutional channels, at a grassroots level the Community has informally organized itself so as to meet its members’ socializing needs. In fact, despite spatial constraints, some places emerge within the community’s mental map as having acquired a vital role for many of its members. Places such as ethnic groceries and food shops run by Moroccans, phone-call centres and money-transfer agencies, *halal* butcher shops and the Mosque, Moroccan restaurants and bazaars, have turned into crucial nodes of the community networks. While responding to Moroccan migrants’ socializing fundamental needs, these nodes also meet both practical (logistic information) and symbolical (familiar setting) needs. Additionally, by facilitating the exchange of information within the community (practical need) and fostering the “word-of-mouth mechanism”, such nodes can sometimes connect the community to outside sources of the majority community as well as of other migrant communities. Such bridging ties, however, are mostly managed by few individuals (e.g., the owners of such places) who, as gatekeepers of the community, play a mediating role without necessarily involving other community members.

However, the most important function of these nodes probably lies in the opportunity they offer to community members to simply “maintain the encounter”(La Cecla 1997), thus responding to a symbolic need as well. In fact, when individuals meet each other and start a conversation, they implicitly confirm or deny the roles of, and the ties between, the people they refer to (family members, neighbours, friends, authorities...). For migrant communities, these events also represent

the opportunity to recall memories of the home-country, mentally establishing trans-national ties with family members and friends left at home or living in other European countries. By “maintaining the encounter”, community members at a time confirm their own role/ties and contribute to the shaping of the new identity of the whole Moroccan community in Italy.

To provide some concrete examples, below are some of the nodes of the community networks that serve as information sources, as socializing opportunities, and respond to migrants’ symbolic needs as well. The main functions these nodes play for community members, as resulting from our research, are listed briefly under each node.

- ‘Ethnic’ groceries and food-shops
 - Gender relevance (shops frequented almost exclusively by women)
 - Symbolic importance (familiar goods)
 - Opportunity to meet non-Moroccan Muslim immigrants, particularly from other North African countries
 - When run by Moroccan owners, these shops may function as crucial key sites within the community network

- Phone call centres
 - Ties with the home-country
 - Ties with other members of the Community
 - Informal informational function
 - Frequently mentioned (especially in Rome) as places where many Moroccans use to go and pass the time with their fellows: *‘They meet each other, talk and exchange the latest news’*

- *Halal* butcher shops
 - Symbolic importance (in relation to religion and familiar environment)
 - In Rome, according to one interviewee, several *halal* butchers are located in the area of Centocelle, a suburb where many immigrants live. Even if only few are Moroccan-owned, many Moroccans come from all over the city to go to these shops in order to meet with one another, exchange information, or just to talk
 - Opportunity to meet non-Moroccan Muslims

- The Mosque.

Even though Moroccans are generally acknowledged as “moderate Muslims”, the Mosque emerges as playing a decisive role as for socializing opportunities. In fact, beyond the religious services, a number of more or less formal activities takes place in and around the Mosque. These include: Arabic classes for 2nd generation children as well as for Italians who want to learn the Arab language; street market where goods and food from countries of origin are sold and where community members use to meet; several types of activities for young Muslims; in addition, the Mosque of Rome also organizes seminars directed to a public of both Muslims and non Muslims; and, lastly, some charity is organized on special occasions. Thus, the Mosque can be hold to represent the following:

- Socializing opportunity with non-family members
- Gender relevance: opportunity for women of the Community to spend time with each other
- Opportunity to meet other non-Moroccan Muslims
- Symbolic relevance (identity) (*‘We do need someone to tell us who we are, don’t we?’*)

- Opportunity for information exchange (especially in rural areas, where no other informal meeting places exist)

Some interviewees highlighted, however, that as a socializing space the Mosque has become more and more relevant after 9/11 and subsequent events, in reaction to perceived and experienced attacks against Muslims. This seems to be particularly the case for women, who in the past used to gather in a city park located in a suburb of Rome, which was replaced “a few years ago” by the Mosque. Today, many Moroccan women gather together at the Mosque, where they take the opportunity to talk and exchange news and stories while sharing the food they bring from home.

- Bazaars and Moroccan Restaurants
 - Bazaars are shops where customers can find everything, from carpets to vegetables, from milk to clothes and pencils. Mentioned as having an increasingly important socializing function for many Moroccan immigrants, bazaars are said to be spreading rapidly especially in Northern cities.
 - Moroccan restaurants are often concentrated in the areas around the Embassy or Consulates. They are frequented mostly by Moroccans at lunch time and by Moroccans and Italians at dinner. Some interviewees find Moroccan restaurants to be “fake” and complain that their food caters to Italian-tastes rather than Moroccan ones. Nonetheless, particularly during day-time they are quite popular among Moroccan men who have to dine out.

Apparently, even after years spent in Italy, most Moroccan citizens prefer to turn to informal channels managed within the community’s boundaries (e.g. the translating agencies), even if less reliable and more “risky”, rather than or prior to turning to an “official” information source (e.g. the CGIL Office or Municipalities’ information desks). According to Breton (1997), while it is inevitable that newly arrived immigrants rely on their own community alone, it can be expected that “with time and the passing of generations, their social ties reach beyond ethno-cultural and racial boundaries”. Why then do informal channels managed by community members continue to be so popular among Moroccan migrants even years after the community has permanently settled in Italy?

Although access to the community’s informal channels may be diversified according to the specific group or “micro-community” that each individual belongs to, it is evident that there is a problem of trust with regards to the host society. As one interviewee clearly stated: “*As an immigrant, you will trust someone from your own country. You will trust someone from your city more and much more if he comes from your same district. If he belongs to your family or to your building, you will trust him blindly*”. Nevertheless, a lack of trust in the channels officially managed by mainstream society could be also caused by a surrounding environment (e.g. majority society) that impedes migrants’ access to such networks. As Breton (2003) states, “it is the difficulty of accessing social capital in the larger community – because of prejudice, hostility or institutional barriers – that leads members of these minorities to search for social capital within their own minority community”. Barriers to accessing information in the majority community may include: perception or experience of objective discrimination/exclusion when turning to some official information desks; cultural differences inhibiting access to the official channels; scarce support offered by mainstream society at the legislative level.

As opposed to these constraints, all the informal networks and nodes described above provide Moroccan migrants with a concrete support for their daily life in Italy. Such networks provide information and socializing opportunities, but they also put immigrants in contact with an overall symbolical dimension that conveys trust. Apparently, language and overall communication codes, as well as food and other culturally related aspects of life, can all turn into key-elements in the formation, or perception, of a “familiar setting” that makes migrants feel at ease. Within such an

environment he/she is not asked “to justify nor to explain anything”, as repeatedly stated by many interviewees. Thus, if we accept the idea that displacement constitutes the central experience shared by community members, around which all community networks have been created, and in relation to which each Moroccan migrant measures his/her sense of membership, then informal community networks can be said to offer them the opportunity to temporarily “freeze” the sense of alienation, or disorientation, that accompanies migration.

6. Conclusion

In our research, community networks were approached in their essential functions of strengthening community members’ sense of identity as well as fostering trust between them. Although not all of our informants perceive themselves as being members of one “Moroccan community”, their social identity in the host country is largely built upon their Moroccan origins. In fact, many of them are employed in areas directly or indirectly serving the community (e.g. cultural and ‘logistic’ mediators, translators, owners of “ethnic” shops, Moroccan restaurants or butcher shops, etc.). In this sense, their identity is constantly reinforced by ties with other Moroccan migrants.

Despite the perception of community members, community networks are vital and strong enough to absorb and mitigate the hardest and most painful effects brought by the migratory experience. This holds particularly true for informal social networks, which respond to the precise needs (information, socializing and symbolic) expressed by Moroccan migrants. Examples are the nodes of the network such as *Halal* butcher shops, phone-call centres, translating agencies, etc. In addition, community networks have developed the capability to remould themselves in order to better adapt to new situation. An example of this is the social change the Mosque has been experiencing in reaction to mainstream society’s closure after the events of 9/11.

The second perspective under which the Moroccan migrants’ “community force” has been explored refers to the capability of the community to both use its resources and devise strategies aimed at fostering the community’s development. Although a great concern arises on who should represent the community and to what extent, various attempts are being made in this direction. The Confederation of Moroccan Associations in Italy represents a response to the need of being reckoned as a trustworthy institutional actor by the host society. It is a response that points at building bridges and ties as a precise integration strategy. By “selling” the image of *one* Moroccan community, the Confederation seeks to achieve active participation in the host society’s civic and political life. The creation of the Confederation represents perhaps the most outstanding example of how community members can join together and effectively use the community resources and social networks in order to strengthen the community itself. The stunning number of associations founded by Moroccan migrants as well as the *Confederation* provide evidence that Moroccan migrants do have the capability to both mobilize resources and devise strategies as a collective body (community). Thus, although controversial and debated between community members, such strategies can be viewed as evidence of Moroccan migrants’ strong will to perform an active role as a minority in the majority society.

In addition, research findings suggest that community networks can be clustered under two main typologies: formal and informal networks.

Formal networks essentially consist of associations, including the Confederation, while amongst informal networks we can find a wide range of networks, ranging from extended family networks, to networks that recall a geographical criteria or some other type of “origin” at home. While formal networks play a fundamental role in representing the community in front of the host society, as well as in front of the society of origin, informal networks can play a crucial role for the well being of community members, particularly in the first hard times following migrants’ arrival. Not only do these networks provide for logistic information regarding employment, accommodation, or other bureaucratic procedures related to immigrants’ stay in Italy. They also

provide for socializing opportunities and indirectly contribute to feed a symbolic dimension, making the immigrant feel more 'comfortable' and safe by providing him/her with an overall familiar setting. In this sense, informal community networks can play a crucial role in mitigating the migration experience.

For community members, formal networks such as associations, are certainly much less functional to their well-being as immigrants. However, formal community networks aim at representing the community in front of host society. In this sense, these networks can contribute to reinforce migrants' social identity and efficiently shape their roles within the majority community. It is thanks to formal networks, not informal networks, that the community acquires visibility within the political arena of the majority.

In conclusion, borrowing social capital's vocabulary, and limiting to the outputs of this research, we can say that formal networks point at building bridging social capital whereas informal networks increase bonding social capital. Speaking of a migrant community, bridging social capital can be hold to be crucial since it enables establishing alliances with other communities as well as with the majority society.

Although Moroccan associations seem to challenge the assumption according to which volunteer associations as such are an indicator of social capital, it is precisely on the political dimension that the ultimate function of Moroccan migrants' associations in Italy lies. In fact, notwithstanding current dispute arising over their legitimacy to represent the community, associations can turn into a valuable tool of political representation. This is especially true in countries like Italy where migrants are not allowed to vote and associations can lead to the creation of a "collective voice" in the political arena. Associations can contribute to consolidating Moroccan migrants' sense of a community, since through associations they acquire the habit of speaking in first person plural as a "we, the Moroccan migrants" collective entity that represents the Moroccan community rather than individuals or family networks.

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