Gender is one of the dimensions where social and cultural differences between various national contexts are notably evident. In particular, non-egalitarian relationships, based on a patriarchal model, are still more present in less modernized contexts, such as Southern Europe. The increasing mobility within Europe coming along the process of unification, and the emergence of a European Collective Mental Space of Reference, through an intensification of material and symbolic exchange among the various countries and cultures, can stimulate reflexive processes of comparison and learning which can lead to significant transformations of identity. Mobility can represent a resource also for the (de-) reconstruction of gender identity, activating a process of redefining traditional gender roles. In fact, encountering a context different from one’s own encourages deep processes of reflective questioning about “who” one is or wishes to be. The specific aim of this contribution is to ascertain under which conditions biographical experiences lived through in contexts and relationships more sensitive to gender equality, may actually activate a process of reshaping gender identity. This contribution addresses the issue through the analysis of three biographical-narrative interviews collected in Italy as part of the Euroidentities Project.

**Key words:** mobility, Europe, gender, identity
1. INTRODUCTION

The literature on transnationalism has shown how gender constitutes a crucial factor in migratory phenomena. After a long period of obscuring the dimension of gender, which meant that migration was treated as an essentially male phenomenon, reflection – as a result of the increasing feminisation of the migratory flow – has concentrated on migrant women, or – more precisely – on the differences between men and women, to all intents and purposes reducing gender to the sex variable. Only recently has it been asserted that migration is at the same time a gendered and gendering phenomenon, as gender, in its wider meaning, influences not only the possibility of migrating and settling, but also, right from the beginning, the reasons for migrating.

The role of gender in mobility choices can be regarded as equally central in the case of intra-European mobility, if one considers that the diversity of gender relationships is still today a crucial element in the gap that separates countries where there is typically a greater institutional commitment to gender equality (the Scandinavian countries and Northern Europe) from those (like Italy, and in particular the South) where the patriarchal system (whose primary consequence is the persistence of inequality of opportunity based on gender, and a rigid division of the productive/reproductive roles according to sex) is barely being eroded. In the relationship between gender and mobility, in fact, an essential role is played by the social imaginary regarding gender roles, and this should stimulate us, on the one hand, to investigate more systematically “the ways in which men and women imagine that the gendered lives of their peers located within transnational migrants’ social fields influence their agency, highlighting in particular their future acts of migration” [Pessar, Mahler, 2003: 828]; and on the other, to give greater consideration to the fact that “the growing importance of the Internet, sex tourism, and other global cultural flows showcases the influence on people’s imagination about the rest of the world beyond their immediate locality, thus expanding the terms of their longings and desires” [Manalansan, 2006: 244]. In the case of intra-European mobility, the existence of a “European Collective Mental

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1 In this perspective gender means much more than being born male or female; in fact, it is conceptualized as a social process. “People do ‘gender work’; through gender practises and discourses they reproduce and/or contest hierarchies of powers and privilege” [Pessar, Mahler 2003: 813]. As for social institutions and arrangements, they are seen as organized according to gender principles and reflecting different interests and hierarchies of power.
Space of Reference” [Schütze, 2011], which favours “making a comparison” across physical borders between nations, milieus, cultures, social atmospheres, and routines, as well as a critique of unequal life-opportunities and chances for “agency” in relation to multiple European others, certainly plays a crucial role in supporting the way people imagine gender roles, which differ from those experienced personally.

Also in the Southern European countries, and in Italy too, impressive changes have characterised the condition of women since the late sixties, thanks to several interwoven phenomena, such as the technologizing of domestic activities, mass media, a new youth culture, the political and cultural atmosphere in the years around 1968, the feminist struggles that brought to the fore for the first time the debate on abortion, contraception, divorce, and mass schooling. As a consequence of these phenomena, women born in ‘40, who were in their twenties in 1968, were the first to question the housewife models of their mothers. They were the first to include work as a crucial dimension in their lives, following initially the so-called ‘communicating vessels’ principle – where paid work is reduced, increased or left according to family needs at various stages of the family life cycle – [Saraceno, 1986], and then the ‘double presence’ model [Balbo, 1978], where family and work become parallel paths, and working becomes a right/duty connected with being an adult woman, independently of the needs of one’s family. Starting from this historical phase, the processes of transformation of the female identity and the aspiration to greater parity in the relationship between the sexes are ongoing. Also with regard to homosexuals, starting from the ‘70s – first in America and later in Europe, and in Italy as well – an increasing and still ongoing request for social recognition and acceptance got under way, addressing both legislation (e.g. the regulation of gay couples and marriage) and cultural policies (tolerance and acceptance of diversity).

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2 One of the main findings of the Euroidentities project is the emergence of a particular collective phenomenon categorized as the “European Collective Mental Space of Reference”. Thanks to the increasing mobility and experiences of encountering other countries and cultures, a commonly shared sphere of orientation emerges, which not only affects individual and collective forms of learning and mutual understanding, but also enlarges people’s horizons for comparison, stimulating a process of reconsidering their practices and expectations. The European collective mental space of reference, therefore, turns out to be very important for the orientation of individuals, and for the development of their biography and identity.

3 The concept of double presence should not be confused with the concept of double burden that stresses the additional work burdening employed women who have also to carry out household work. The former concept emphasizes the new spaces that are opened, both in terms of life structure and self-definition, by the working experience as a ‘normal’ element in one’s biography.
Unfortunately these new demands and claims met with great resistance in Italy, which remains a country where gender inequality is still strong and the recognition of gay people rights is still weak (if not totally absent\textsuperscript{4}). This study aims to show how the tension that arises on one side between aspirations of parity and the acknowledgement of one’s rights, and the persistence of an institutional system disinclined to support such a need for change on the other, represents one of the reasons of the centrality of gender in mobility processes. We shall argue, in other words, that European mobility can be seen as an instrument for (de-) reconstructing gender identity. But our analysis will also illustrate how the passage from traditional to more modernized contexts does not necessarily imply the possibility for a woman to become emancipated and for a homosexual to get rid of the stigma of deviance. From different biographical experiences and various resources available, unexpected consequences can arise, with heavy biographical costs to be paid.

2. GENDER AND MOBILITY THROUGH THREE BIOGRAPHIES

The relation between gender and mobility will be addressed by analysing three cases\textsuperscript{5}: two young women, Maria and Nora, and a young gay man, Marco, all of them from Naples.

2.1. Maria – The homecomer: mobility as a missed chance

Maria is a 28-year-old woman born and living in the province of Naples. She has been married for about three years and has a child of 9 months. Maria comes from a lower-middle class family; her father works on the railways and is retired. Her mother is a housewife. Maria is the third and youngest daughter. She has a brother and a sister who is almost two years older than her. Although hers is a family of humble origins, education is valued in her home as a means of social upward mobility, fully reflecting a characteristic trend in Italy in the last two decades of the twentieth century.

\textsuperscript{4} Although a long process of change in the social representation of LGBT people, weakening the idea of “deviation” and gradually accepting their social visibility [Rossi Barilli 1999] has begun, Italy is still almost at a legislative level, due to the powerful influence of the Vatican [Saraceno, Naldini 2007].

\textsuperscript{5} Maria has been interviewed as an Educational Mobile, Marco and Nora as persons involved in a cross-cultural Intimate relation. The cases have been analyzed using the “biographical narrative interpretive method” (BNIM) [see Wengraft 2001, 2008].
Maria’s childhood and adolescence were fairly quiet, those years being marked by the regular progress of the school calendar. Nevertheless, there is an element which seems to have had a great effect on her life, i.e., the presence of an older sister, some 20 months older than her, whom Maria has always compared herself with. The arena for competition is represented by school, since the two sisters were influenced by their parents’ expectations of educational achievements. In order to understand the relevance of the meaning of education, we have to take into account that in Italy, during the ‘80s and the ‘90s, also daughters were vested with high expectations particularly by mothers, dreaming of a destiny of modern women for them (able to be at the same time professionals, wives and mothers) as continuously proposed by public discourse on gender equality.

Maria’s narration of her childhood is focussed on two elements: the school and her sister. From nursery school to grammar school, the sisters attended the same schools, and as Maria is the younger, she felt right from the start the need to overtake her sister rather than to follow in her footsteps as she says in the opening of the main story part: “Then Giorgia was in elementary school and I was in the second year of nursery and for me this was so stressful ((quickly)). Then I moved up and she was in the third year of elementary school and I was in the first year. Then she finished and went to middle school and I was anxious to finish to go to the middle school. I was in the first year and she was in the third year and then she left the year after for high school”.

In the years of adolescence, Maria starts a phase of distancing from her sister, giving rise to a form of incipient individualisation that will continue later with the choice of the Faculty: Maria indeed enrols at Modern Languages and Literature, opting for a University course different from her sister’s. During her third year at university, she meets a colleague doing her Erasmus at R****, a university town in the UK, and decides to visit her. When she returns to Naples, she discovers she has finally won an Erasmus scholarship for R**** (in fact the truth, Erasmus is an almost obligatory step for those who study languages like Maria). Her stay there lasts around 10 months and Erasmus is a golden opportunity for her, because she can finally do something that nobody – not even her sister who in the meantime had already graduated – has ever done before her. Besides, staying abroad has a very strong symbolic value, since it represents the chance to gain a sort of status symbol [Bagnoli, 2009] in Maria’s but also in her parents’ and friends’ eyes: moving abroad in fact constitutes a sign of belonging to the globalised society [Bauman, 1998].

The interviewee’s experience abroad consists in study, work and life. In R**** she passes four exams with good marks, and works as a reception hostess
and cleaner, making new and important friendships. Thanks to the hospitality of a Hungarian girl, who has been living in England for many years, Maria is able to leave the university residence. At this friend’s house, Maria can finally enlarge her cultural horizon: “from that moment I lived a life not like an Erasmus student but like a typical English girl, i.e. we did English dinners, English barbecues”. The emphasis she lays on her experiences in that typically English cottage is strong, since they trigger mechanisms of learning deriving from the comparison with the otherness, nurturing that complex process of individualization that started in adolescence: “it’s as if -ehm- I had left behind the child always looked after by mummy always what time will you be back? and made way for the woman”.

The analysis of the overall biographical development of Maria shows how Erasmus actually represents a main ingredient in her attempt to beat the successes of her sister in the professional field, rather than marking a moment of discontinuity and transformation of her identity. The emphasis she places on the metamorphic value of this experience, often recalled in epic tones, gives her the possibility of cloaking her self-image in almost heroic terms. And even her love of foreign things, which is actually more apparent than real, fully corresponds to her desire to present herself as a woman, who, compared with her family, and in particular her sister, and her milieu, has taken on something new, a certain something called internationalisation: “through this study and perhaps also through the study of the different cultures of different countries these things led me to be – led to this internationalisation of my personality”. The Erasmus experience takes on, in other words, the aspect of a strategy meant to overcome the inadequacy Maria feels in the family environment (she herself speaks of redemption). In this perspective, Maria confirms that “travelling can be a way to define alternative gender identities opposing the social expectations which spatially confine women within the restricted spaces of the home” [McDowell, 1999 in Bagnoli, 2009: 332].

In R****, Maria encounters a lifestyle really different from her own, but she remains firmly tied to her own network of family ties, and in fact all the people who populated her pre-Erasmus life are present even when she is there; the sister, the boyfriend, her best friend in Naples, her parents, all go often to visit her. Maria herself often returns to Italy, for the national holidays and her sister’s wedding. Remaining stably anchored to her context of origin, she actually keeps her distance from those who have a freer lifestyle: the friends on campus who have you know the love that blooms in the morning and dies in the night; the crazy English boy who is interested in her, and even though he fascinates her, comes from a world where people even if you get a boyfriend or you get married they are not things
you take too seriously; and even the cousin who has lived in London for years and who is in some way the person that I would have liked to be if I hadn’t had this relationship with my boyfriend. Nevertheless, the experience lived abroad constitutes an opportunity to begin an intense activity of comparison between the persons populating her pre-Erasmus life and the persons accompanying Maria during this experience of opening up her horizons.

The experience abroad finishes as planned and her return to Naples certainly is no source of pain for Maria, who even came back from England victorious, with four exams with good marks and a lot of international experiences under her belt which finally put her above her family. Her intention is clearly to capitalise to the full on the symbolic value of her stay abroad. Problems begin almost straight away at university, because the interviewee meets some difficulties in validating an exam passed abroad, signalling how the process of homogenisation of university curricula is still far from being realised. Maria suffers not only because she feels she has suffered an injustice, but also because her low mark for the degree – as a consequence of the difficulties mentioned above – cancels out all the previous efforts to gain credit with her family. In this situation the significance of the Erasmus experience is completely overturned, because Maria, instead of being victorious, now becomes a loser again: “then also the fact that my brother has a certain type of job – my sister has a certain type of job ... I’m the only one so perhaps I am the black sheep but what can I say? Then also this – my brother graduated with 110 cum laude – my sister with 108 and I with 98. I am the black sheep of the family in the end”.

The experience of failure occurred after her coming back leads Maria to flow back into the tradition, and the gender roles that tradition assigns to a young woman, as she is: she gets married, has a baby, aspires to professional ambitions more easily reconcilable with her domestic role (e.g. teacher) and continues to do “under the table” work, and completely unrelated to her education (she does promotions in supermarkets). Once again, the comparison with the sister makes Maria be a loser: her sister got married and had a child before her and she is doing very well with her job. The defeat is made even worse by the judgment of her relatives: “also my father – an ignorant person – says OK, but these people are right because in the end you graduated to end up behind a table to stop people and say Madame take our card. But what can I do about it if I can’t find anything else?”.

Maria thus starts off an intense biographical work aimed at laying the reasons for the defeat outside herself (the Southern environment which offers little in the way of work opportunities, nepotism and special favours, the necessity
of looking after a child, etc.), and on the other hand a reassessment of a wholly traditional gender role where looking after a child and family values become fundamental pillars.

And also more recent episodes regarding jobs that Maria has rejected since they would take her far from home show how this woman has staked everything on the traditional gender role centred on the primacy of the family. Yet, we cannot ignore the fact that Maria lives in a difficult context — such as Southern Italy — structurally characterised by high rates of female unemployment, lack of social services for children, uneven distribution of domestic tasks between husband and wife. Maria’s claims of individualisation and redemption are abandoned and Erasmus is something of the past (*I did it for the experience but it finished there*).

The reflux into tradition can be seen as an attempt to change not supported by the context: when Maria returns from the UK she is changed, but her *milieu* has remained the same.

### 2.2. Marco – The exiled: mobility as “conversion”

Marco is a man of 32 from a middle class family. He comes from a suburb to the North of Naples. He has only one sister, a bit older than him. After finishing grammar school, Marco enrolls at University. During his studies, Marco wins an Erasmus scholarship to London, where he later decides to go and live. In London Marco encounters his first male partner with whom he still lives, despite their relationship being over.

During adolescence, following a route rather typical of homosexuals in general [Barbagli, Colombo, 2007; Saraceno, 2003], Marco lives the first phase of his life, trying to ignore his condition: “*during the senior school years /Ehm / it wasn’t really a major part of my life let’s say. I had my friends and I didn’t think much about the fact that maybe yes – yes I liked some of the boys ((quickly)) at school but not – I didn’t think about it much because maybe yes you start to think bit by bit and you grow up being gay but I had decided that – it wasn’t a part of my life that I wanted to go into more or that I wanted to follow up anyway. I wanted a family you know – a wife and children so I put this part of my life to one side at senior school*”. In this phase he therefore dedicates himself exclusively to study, doing well at school and enrolling at the Faculty of Economics. From his narration, it appears that his life goes on quietly, without many friends, without hobbies, without particular interests. In a situation quite poor in terms of social relations, Marco’s few friends, at least in those years, were all female, as often the case of gay boys.
During the university years, Marco continues his strategy of denying his homosexuality, a condition which leads him to embark upon a sentimental relationship with a girl. Despite this, over those years, Marco begins to realize the need to free himself of those institutionalized gender models that ended up trapping him in an existence that *sic et simpliciter* is not his. A signal of this incipient widening of his interior space is represented by the change of faculty: Marco in fact moves from the conservative faculty of Economics to the innovative International Studies, a faculty which had just been set up, promising a vibrant atmosphere and much wider scenarios.

The next step in this “expansion process” is represented by the decision to move to London as an Erasmus Student. This is a new phase in Marco’s life, in the sense that the interviewee starts to feel the potential which the anonymous megapolis could offer in terms of expressing one’s identity. In London, then, far from his family and the narrow social environment having surrounded him, Marco reveals his homosexuality for the first time to a female friend. The Erasmus experience has a biographical meaning that completely oversteps the educational aspect, since it has an essential function in the adoption of a strategy, widely used by homosexuals in Southern Italy, that consists in distancing themselves from the context of origin [Barbagli, Colombo, 2007]. London indeed is far enough in order not to force him to come out into the open with his relatives: “I thought *I’d have the chance at last to have – to follow up what I wanted from life – you know, finding a partner but also getting experience. Obviously when I decided to move to England my idea was to do it in secret*. Moreover, London seems to provide greater opportunities to live the homosexual condition more easily.

After finishing the Erasmus period, in one summer, Marco thus takes a series of definitive steps: he tells his parents that he wants to move permanently to London, in effect abandoning his university studies; he leaves his girlfriend; he tells another girl about his homosexuality. Once in London, Marco starts to frequent the gay scene, albeit with some difficulties: “I remember the first time I went in a gay bar. It was a very... not traumatic experience but you know? The first time you go in a gay bar you don’t know what to expect. You have all these preconceptions that perhaps they drum into you when you are growing up and so I remember that I was really nervous and so I went backwards and forwards in front of the bar until I finally decided to go in”.

After some time, his new life in London begins to take shape and indeed he finds work, he attends a two-year course in Marketing, and joins a gay sport group, where he meets the man who will be his partner for eight years. In those years Marco can finally have a lifestyle where to be gay and live with another man is
considered as completely “normal”: “I get on very well with the neighbors who – you know? are very kind... are very... Yeah the fact that when we moved there and were – were a gay couple ...I mean we were very well accepted as if we were a normal family I mean... a traditional family”. The process of Marco’s identity metamorphosis goes one step further with his conversion to the Anglican church that, recognizing the autonomy of the believer in the interpretation of the Scriptures, matches well with his need of individualization: “The Anglican religion is very much based on the individual so the fact of not having anyone telling you what to think or how to read a certain thing but the fact that you read the scriptures directly you know... and in a way also to interpret the religion in the most appropriate way or at least I think it is the way you can interpret it yourself”.

If it is reasonable to say that in London Marco succeeded in completing his biographical transformation, arriving among other things at a reinterpretation of homosexuality as a condition “no different” from all the others, it should be anyway noted how a lot of questions remain unresolved at home. At least until circumstances force his hand (when his mother and his sister announce they are going to visit him), Marco carefully avoids telling his family he is gay. Moreover, acceptance by the family is only partial, so much so that Marco never speaks explicitly about this situation with his father, even though he knows that he was informed about it by his mother: “I told my mother but I’ve never told my father ... she told my father and he asked her not to tell me that she had – that she had told him. So my father knew I knew that he knew but it is something we never spoke about. We have always pretended”.

Substantially, Marco experiences a typically Southern model of conceiving homosexuality defined as “repressive tolerance” or in simpler words “it happens, but we don’t talk about it” [Rossi Barilli, 1999]; a model which he didn’t have the strength to contest openly. Marco has never had the will to challenge the tradition. Rather than challenging his father, Marco decided to substitute the father figure: his partner, who is indeed a very well-off man and many years older than him, beyond playing the role of a “ferryman” in Marco’s path of self-acceptance, takes on a role of protection of a paternal type. On the other hand, rather than changing himself – giving up the chance to express his gay identity – Marco has chosen to change the context where he lives.

Marco’s story is an emblematic case of a journey of identity metamorphosis, played out between two culturally very distant contexts: the South of Italy and the United Kingdom. His story however is not without costs: the interviewee, in fact, had to cut ties with his past, making a clean break between the person
he was and the person who has become, thereby losing the opportunity to feel accepted in the context of his most significant relationships.

2.3. Nora – The mender: mobility as renewed continuity

Nora, who is 34, was born in a small provincial town in Southern Italy. Hers is a lower-middle class family: her mother is a nurse, and her father is a workman. She has three sisters, one three years younger than her, the others are ten and even twenty years younger. Her three sisters have never left their home town, and – except for the youngest one – they are both married with children.

Nora’s childhood was marked by two significant elements: the constant moving around of her family from one town to another and the distance from her mother in the first three years of her life: she worked far from home, and only came home at weekends. Nora was brought up by her grandmother whom she originally called mamma. The absence of the maternal figure is an experience that still nowadays affects Nora, as her attempts to justify her mother show: “This is something I didn’t tell you, in reality -mm- the first... three years of my life were at my grandmother’s, I grew up with my grandmother because my mother had got a job and was assigned to a remote village in the mountains, some absurd place with those roads we had in the South, in the ’70s to get there and back was practically impossible, so my mother stayed there from Monday to Saturday -eh- in that town, and then she came back on Saturday afternoon and stayed with us on Saturday and Sunday, so -mm- I grew up with -mmh- in fact ... my mother tells me that the first time I said “mamma” it was to grandma, not to her”.

Generally speaking, the girl has a tranquil childhood, as a small-town girl, even though, because of the constant moving, she barely manages to integrate into her peer group: “I didn’t really feel like frequenting people of my own age -mmh- it was no fun, I spent the whole day reading – and for my mum it was an aspect ... the crazy daughter, the strange child”. Reading represents an important element in the unfolding identity of Nora, nurturing the feeling of being different from her peers.

Adolescence marks a changing point in her life. Nora begins a sort of distinction strategy, that is different from the typical pathway of girls like her (and her sisters). It’s a process of individualisation, the first step becomes the choice of school, in fact – going against the wishes of her mother and unlike the typical choices of young people of her social background who normally choose technical education – she enrolls at the grammar school (a type of school that leads to university studies) even though this means having to go to a school in a town far
from home: “We are 4 sisters, I am the eldest … and well I’m the only one of the sisters to … who went away to study and who stayed away to live so the other three sisters live, all of them … in the town … or in a town nearby”.

Her detachment/distinction route continues, and even gets stronger, after her high school diploma. Girls like her don’t usually go on with their studies, but she had made up her mind to go to university and, what is more, she chooses – again against the wishes of her mother – a faculty which exists only in Naples even further from home: “I have always wanted to go away, to do something else, to move – and … especially to study, I mean, to go to university. I really remember this … but since I was a child, since I can remember that I had to go to”. She enrols at the faculty of Oriental languages, and also the choice of “exotic” languages not only comes from her genuine interest in Asia, but also has a symbolic meaning: taking her far from the narrow world in which she lived.

Nora seemed very determined to pursue her objective distancing (both physically and socially) from the family. Despite having a block during her studies (she can’t manage an exam for three years), she stays in Naples, and keeps herself doing all sorts of jobs (including menial work). During this period, Nora’s difficulties, which will take her to the verge of depression, are not only about the university degree but also her sentimental life, as she has a complicated love affair, which will leave behind it painful after-effects. All the difficulties seem to be offset by the effervescence of the metropolitan context, which makes her feel at the centre of the world. In those years, Nora enlarges her cultural horizons enormously, participating intensely in the youth life of her university. In other words, she undertakes a process of learning and redefining the relationships with others: “you could spend the day chatting with anyone, practically, from ladies on the buses to your friend from university – really … it was very nice – and in those years a deep change took place in me, a softening of… comprehension -mmh- learning to see the other point of view, to understand, you know, how certain arguments are foolish, to accept differences, not to take anything for granted, you know even your own truths or limits, you know … it helped me to grow up”.

Her distinction strategy found its main support in Mike, a Dutch boy in Naples doing his Erasmus, whom she began to date, and whom a year later she was living with. The fact that Mike is foreign, that she lived a sort of Bohemian existence with him, and that he already has a daughter (whom he had never wanted to meet, and did so only upon Nora’s insistence) adds to her distinction. Her sisters are housewives, victims of routine; she is free and leads an alternative and interesting life: “They envy me a bit and a bit … they think that I’m not quite right because I think … obviously, the fact that I don’t have children -mmh - this
naturally … -mmh- gets me out of a lot of responsibilities, doesn’t it? And also makes some choices easier, the things that I really want to do – they, naturally, are heavily restricted. In fact, I get the … I mean, I think that here, my home is a bit of a safety valve for them, you know … When they want a complete break they come two or three days here and have – quite another lifestyle, another timetable, other eating habits. It’s all different for them, isn’t it(?) and so … you know, I think they like – it’s a kind of oasis here where they come to hide when they’ve had enough – of everyday life”.

Furthermore, Mike also has a mediating function. On the one hand, the relationship with him allows her to follow the “distinction” path; on the other, it gives her the chance to have, for the first time in her life, a lasting relationship (the other important relationship was so complicated to have to remain secret), which makes it possible to restore the relations with her family: “my pathway to growth was undoubtedly marked by my leaving my family, because … because it … a separation that … at a specific time I wanted very much, because … and this, strangely, happened … no strangely, happened at a time when I let’s say, got together with my boyfriend Mike … the moment when it got serious between us – then there was a better relationship with my family”.

Even if the stability of the relationship gets Nora back on the track of a more traditional life, through Mike she can have access to a more egalitarian model of gender relation, based on a fair distribution of domestic tasks, the freedom of managing one’s own time, choice rather than obligation: “firstly, -mmh- with Mike I’ve seen for the first time true parity between the sexes, but in everything, really in everything, for good and ill […] Mike never expects never expects me to do things for him, I mean -mmh- a lot of Italian men expect you to look after the house, to do the shopping, iron the shirts […] Mike has never been like that with me, not even from the first day, absolutely nothing – he’s never // I don’t mean asked, but he’s never expected me to do something or imagined that I was expected to do something, that’s never happened. I definitely think that’s the most important difference. Another factor, which is still connected to this, is his respect … for my time, I mean the time that I spend outside the home is not a matter for the inquisition”.

After the encounter with Mike, Nora went back to studying again, succeeded in graduating and got a job at university which she has been doing till now. Even though it is not a permanent position, which has been going on for several years on fixed term contracts, Nora is wholly satisfied. It is, in fact, a job which allows her to have contacts with other European countries: one more window on the world which allows her to be distant, and therefore different from the traditional
route (marriage, maternity and work which provides little satisfaction) followed by her sisters.

Only recently has Nora’s distinction-orientated phase entered a period of crisis. Nora is now 34 years old and has to weigh up what she has achieved: a pleasing but precarious job, a fluctuating and uncertain income. Furthermore, the passing of time could limit the possibility to become a mother: “What frightens me is to see time going by possibilities getting limited – the choice you have – this is what frightens me – growing up and – while ever there is choice it’s ok it’s afterwards that it starts to get complicated”.

If we consider the biography of Nora in the light of the relationship between mobility and gender, we can affirm that, although Nora has not gone to Europe, in some ways she has brought Europe home. Her relationship with Mike, indeed, has allowed her to live a new way of being a female partner and to feel an emancipated woman, without giving up what, in her culture of origin, is considered constitutive of femininity. The affirmation of her autonomy, for instance, is not based on the rejection of housework, but on the assertion of the principle of choice and parity: “Even if sometimes I do it [ironing] like yoga, you know, for meditation ((miming a gesture with the iron in hand as a tool for concentration practice)) and nothing, no, we really have a very – balanced division of the home, of tasks ... whatever, cooking, dishes, washing machine, shopping, household management – these are things we share absolutely equally”.

If it is possible to sustain that Nora has been quite successful in “sewing up” the past and the present, what she was and what she has become, we cannot ignore that the conciliation of tradition and modernity implied giving up an important aspect of every woman’s life, i.e., motherhood. Nora does not have a stable job yet, and living far from her family, could not rely on her mother and sisters, a crucial kind of help in Italy where the welfare system offers little support of caring services, mainly delegated to women. Furthermore, the choice of not marrying – an essential ingredient of defining herself as a “liberated” woman – clashes with the Italian institutional constraints notoriously reluctant to recognise forms of cohabitation outside marriage [Saraceno, Naldini 2007]: “Mike and I have been living together for 5 years but not – I mean for 7 years, and we’ve had a contract for the same house for 5 years – both our names are on the contract but it has the same value as if we were two friends from university. This is a very big limitation for people who make this kind of life choice, it’s not easy”.

3. COMPARING CASES

The three cases presented in this study, as always happens when biographies are concerned, bring to light remarkable differences but also evident similarities. They show, in fact, how the same experience of mobility in Europe derives from both different personal conditions and social circumstances. Another difference regards the biographical meaning that the experience of mobility has taken on in the identity construction of the three interviewees, as well as the consequences of the event and its costs. The three biographies however have in common the interconnection between the experience of mobility and a change in identity and/or gender roles, and this constitutes the focus of this contribution. The biographies will be compared taking into consideration the most meaningful dimensions in order to grasp their overall construct. These dimensions are: 1) social and personal background, 2) openness towards mobility, 3) meaning of the experience of mobility, 4) effects of the experience in (or of) another country, 5) consequences on identity, and 6) biographical costs.

The social and personal background

The first point to remark, in making the comparison, is that the three interviewees have different backgrounds both in terms of social status and geographical origin, these factors having proved to have deeply influenced the development of each biography. With regard to social background, Maria and Nora, coming from traditional lower middle-class families, are from a milieu that still sees in children’s education a means of social promotion – especially for females, who, in Italy as in other European countries, for some decades have been systematically achieving better academic results than males [Ocse, 2010]. Marco, on the other hand, shows how sometimes middle-class children – who are not supported by strong aspirations for social mobility – do not find sufficient motivation to reach high levels of education in a context where unemployment – even intellectual – is very widespread. Marco is in fact the only one of the three interviewees not to have concluded his university studies.

As for their geographical origins, they come from completely different contexts. Maria was born and still lives, along with all her family, in a small town in the province of Naples, where she can benefit from a social capital enriched by both physical proximity and the communitarian nature of relationships, while Marco comes from a central area of a metropolis (Naples), which reflects the topos of city life, where affective and meaningful relationships are scarce. Nora,
instead, is from a small semi-rural communitarian context, even if the continual transfers which marked her childhood prevented her from becoming rooted in her community as in the case of Maria.

Besides their different territorial origin, and partially influenced by it, we find a different kind of family. If Maria seems to be surrounded by a dense network of kinship ties, in Marco’s case we find few strong ties and a lack of communication even within the family. Nora lies between these two extremes. Like Maria, she comes from a close-knit family structure, in her case characterized by a prevalently female presence, but she seems to hold a rather marginal position with respect to the core formed by her mother and sisters, because of the age gap among the four daughters.

To these background elements, some others need to be added, of a more personal nature, which seem to weigh significantly on the biographical development and, consequently, also on the experience of mobility. In Maria’s case, it was the situation of rivalry with her sister that was very relevant, while for Marco, his homosexuality definitely represented the element that led him to choose to live in another country. For Nora, at least two factors dating back to her early childhood need to be taken into consideration. The first is the abandonment she experienced as a young child because of her mother going to work far from home, while the second can be traced back to a feeling of being uprooted due to the frequent moving from one village to another.

**Openness towards mobility**

The origin of the three interviewees’ willingness to move may be understood in the light of the complex interlacing of the social and personal factors described above. In Maria’s case, for example, competition with her sister and the desire for individual affirmation, along with an ambition to social mobility through education, facilitated the development of a strong spirit of resourcefulness and a tendency to adopt active action schemes. In fact, in spite of the lack of previous experience of mobility in her family, her strong emotional family ties, and a long-standing boyfriend, Maria – also driven by her studying foreign languages – decided to apply to do an Erasmus, taking an unexpected path for a girl of her milieu. In Nora’s case, instead, the readiness to move is nothing but the final outcome of a biographical trajectory that, in response to her uprooting and abandonment experience, had led her to construct a “world apart” through lengthy and solitary reading. The first experience of strangeness indeed can be seen in her “immersion” in oriental novels and the fascination the story of distant
and different worlds exerted on her. As Pessar and Mahler state, discussing the conditions behind the migratory process: “There are cases where people may not take any transnational actions that can be objectively measured, yet live their lives in a transnational cognitive space that does have measurable effects” [Pessar, Mahler, 2003: 818]. In Nora’s case the disposition to otherness is accompanied also by the development of another specific inclination, closely bound to it: the rejection of social conventions, conformity, and supposed “normality”. For Marco, lastly, openness to mobility finds its origin in the tension between his aspiration to an ordinary life and his sexual orientation. In other words, having lived in a context – both family and social – disinclined to accept homosexuality as a normal condition, Marco in moving to a less stigmatising country catches a glimpse of the possibility to conciliate his identity requirements and social and family expectations. Research on homosexuals in Italy seems to confirm that they are geographically more mobile than others; moving from small towns to big cities is more frequent, but there is no shortage of cases, like that of Marco, of moving to another European country [Barbagli, Colombo, 2007].

The meaning of the experience of mobility

The mobility experience, as stated above, assumes different meanings in the biography of our interviewees. For Maria the experience in the UK as an Erasmus student essentially meant starting a process of individualisation and a broadening of her cultural horizons; in short, mobility meant all the experiences that led her to no longer feel “the child that I was before”, but a woman with an “international” perspective. In the UK, Maria had her first experiences of work; she kept herself at university, she learned to manage friendly relations with the other sex, and for the first time had some “transgressive” experience. All this allowed her to open towards a gender model very different from the traditional model of her environment, focussed on the accessory function of women’s work. In fact her story seems to confirm the results of a recent research in Italy, in which it is observed that for Italian students, the Erasmus experience takes on the meaning of

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6 Sexual identity is only one of the dimensions making up gender. In sociological literature on gender and in Sexology, sexual identity tends to be considered today as a multidimensional construct within which four components can be distinguished: sex, meaning the biological being male or female determined by the sex chromosomes; gender identity, i.e., the identification of a person as man or woman as a permanent trait of the personality; the gender role, i.e., the set of expectations concerning behaviour considered suitable for men and women in a given culture or period of time; and lastly, sexual orientation, meaning erotic and emotional attraction for members of the opposite, the same, or both sexes [Abbatecola 2008].
a “temporary subversion of status” open to the experimentation of new identities [Bettin Lattes, Bontempi, 2008].

Also for Marco and Nora, the meaning of mobility is strictly connected to gender issues. In the first case, it is a real “liberation” from a family and social context which threatened the expression of his authentic gender identity, pushing him to conform to the “hegemonic model of one-way masculinity” [Ruspini, 2009]. In Nora’s case, mobility – in the form of a relationship with a foreign partner – reinforces her strategy of distinction, allowing her to include the “different”, no longer merely through reading and imagination but in her real daily life. Similarly to what Munt [1994] observed regarding new forms of tourism, it could be stated that even having a foreign partner can represent in these globalised times “a practice through which the new middle classes construct themselves as ‘alternative’ and define their class distinction” [Munt, 1994 in Bagnoli, 2009].

The effects of the experience in (or of) another country

Looking at the effects of the experience of mobility in Europe, beyond some common aspects in the three biographies (such as the broadening of the horizons of reference due to the encountering with other cultures, the processes of “hybridisation” of behaviours and models of orientation, the greater sensitivity towards “otherness”), we find relevant differences which appear particularly interesting. These differences on one hand have their origin in the diversity of social and personal backgrounds and in the different disposition towards mobility. On the other, they can be interpreted in the light of the structural conditions of the contexts in which the interviewees have continued their life trajectories after the experience of mobility.

Maria, upon her return to Italy, did not find a favourable context either at university, where her experience abroad was not rewarded as she expected, or in the more general social milieu where, after graduation, she did not get the chance of a job consistent with the studies she had undertaken. In the end, coming up against a labour market unfavourable to women, Maria was not able to put into practice that ability to aspire to a more modern gender model, cultivated attending university and strengthened in the course of her stay abroad, i.e., in a context better disposed to promoting the participation of women. Her choice to marry and to have a child very early, and the acceptance of intermittent bad-jobs represents what could be interpreted as a return to the past, which, in her case should mostly be read as a return to the traditional model of woman as a person mainly devoted to family care work and dependent on her husband. Marco’s situation is different, because for
him the mobility experience did not represent a brief interlude, but a definitive life choice. In London, the city he has chosen as his “second home”, his life seems to be completely redefined and reorganized thanks to the opportunity to freely express his homosexuality. Finally, in Nora’s case we do not find a before and after, since through mobility she can manage to realize the continuity of her Self, which now appears to be enriched by the added value of the relationship with a foreigner. This added value is also crucial in reinforcing family ties. Having a foreign partner, in the eyes of her family, is at the same time a mark of “exceptionality” but also of “ordinariness” since the “crazy” and non-conformist girl she was supposed to be, has finally settled down into a normal partnership relationship. What Nora found, in the end, is a way of “staying different without deviation from the normative cultural expectations” [Paadam et al., 2011].

Consequences in terms of identity

As we have tried to show so far, gender represents a structuring principle in all the biographies analysed, even if in completely different ways. In Marco’s case his sexual orientation is concerned, while in the cases of Maria and Nora it is rather a matter of searching for emancipation. Moreover, if Marco moving abroad succeeds in finding the right conditions to live his gay identity as “normality”, Maria doesn’t succeed in her intent. Her falling back into tradition brings to mind the figure of Alfred Schutz’s home-comer. Maria, in fact, really seems to experience a kind of cognitive dissonance between the transformation of her identity – the change of her way of thinking of herself as a woman – and the environment she finds coming back, that has not changed at all, continuing to offer her only the traditional “wife and mother” model. As for Nora, instead, it is another aspect of gender that comes to the fore, i.e., the issue of parity between men and women. Through her relationship with her Dutch partner, more sensitive towards gender equality than Italian men, Nora can overcome the limits of the traditional female role, so redefining herself as a real “modern” woman.

The biographical costs

The analysis of the three cases has shown how even in the case of trajectories that seem to have led to the realisation of one’s expectations, there are some costs to be paid. These are particularly heavy for Maria. Her story shows, in fact, how the mobility experience represents for her a missed chance of emancipation, with the consequent frustration of her expectations, only partially mitigated by the awareness that she had lived a meaningful experience, with important
consequences for herself: the “internationalisation of her person” due to her stay abroad, in fact, became an essential part of her way of seeing life and the world. Less obvious, but no less important, are the biographical costs for Nora and Marco. For Nora, as for Maria, the structural conditions and in particular the occupational difficulties hindered her achieving a condition of full self-realization (as a matter of fact, at the age of 34, she doesn’t have a stable occupation and she has renounced motherhood). As for Marco’s biographical costs, though less visible, they can be traced between the lines of his interview, especially when, revealing that he never spoke about his homosexuality with his father, now dead, he appears to be deeply touched and emotionally moved. In his case, it can therefore be said that the full realisation of his gender identity through mobility has implied a total and painful renunciation to be accepted by the most beloved and significant persons of his life.

4. SOME REFLECTIONS ON THE RELEVANCE OF MOBILITY IN GENDER ISSUES

Even in intra-European mobility, as generally in migration phenomena, gender seems to play a primary role. The choice of doing a European experience, in fact, often appears to be inspired by issues connected to gender, since the diversity among the various European countries with regard to the cultural and symbolic structures (that in the various contexts dictate the gender roles and the relationships between the genders) can favour phenomena of mobility and/or have an influence on their course.

Sometimes mobility is intentionally connected to issues related to sexuality. The case of Marco, for example, shows how “sexuality and sexual identities, practices, and desires may be pivotal factors for migration” and how “sexuality, broadly conceived, can be the indirect or direct motivation for international relocation and movement” [Manalansan, 2006: 225]. The case in question also suggests heeding the recommendation to “go beyond a working gendered agent and highlight a desiring and pleasure-seeking migrant subject” [ibidem: 243]. In other cases, such as Nora’s, the intention is not to address questions relating to sexuality issues, but rather to women’s search for more equal relationships, in response to a need for emancipation, overcoming the traditional gender roles.

Mobility is not only influenced by reasons connected to gender and sexuality, but in turn, exerts a remarkable influence on gender identity. The experience

\[\text{footnote}{\text{Manalansan [2006] takes up Carrillo’s concept of “sexual migration” [2004].}}\]
of mobility, seen here as an encounter with another culture, and therefore also with a different structure of gender relationships, in fact stimulates biographical work, and activates a process of self-reflection that has relevant consequences for identity, including gender identity. Travelling, as Bagnoli affirms, referring to many scholars “is a way of becoming someone, an experience which helps to construct new identities. From ancient myth and literature, the dimension of the journey has long been associated with a process of inner search, self-discovery, and renewal” [Bagnoli, 2009: 325–326].

Mobility and the processes of comparison, learning and self-reflection it activates, produces a more or less gradual process of metamorphosis that, as shown in the cases illustrated, finds its origin in previous experiences and circumstances. The experience of mobility can in fact intervene in different phases of biography and identity development. Sometimes it serves as a search for a more suitable context for expressing an identity which is already defined (e.g., the case of Marco, who can find a more open-minded mentality in London, where homosexuals are accepted and where practical benefits and institutional resources are available to them). Sometimes, especially for women, mobility serves as a search for a context which powerfully supports the development of identification processes already started at home (through trajectories of emancipation from the family of origin, or attempts to interpret more egalitarian and modern gender roles, as in Maria and Nora’s case).

These cases show how the process of reshaping identity manifests itself in different ways and directions, which appear differently combined from case to case. However, crucial elements seem to be:

– an individualisation pathway (“liberation” from binding family contexts)

and an emancipation trajectory,

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8Biographical work is an inner activity of mind, involving emotions, which mainly consists in a conversation with oneself and with significant others. It is done by narrative recollection and by a critical reflection about one’s own life course. It includes an analytical comparison of alternative understandings of the past, in a reflective decision-making in the present, in imagining a personal future that harmoniously or contrastively has to be connected to the overall gestalt of one’s own biography [Corbin and Strauss, 1988].

9This happens because, as Giddens notes [Giddens, 1991], the decision to move is often associated with particular biographical moments which put a question mark on the life and identity of the person and so require specific and intense self-reflection.

10Sometimes, especially for youth, mobility represents the means for one’s own search for identity, the possibility to take a pause for reflection (a moratorium period) in order to decide who one wants to be, the opportunity to freely experiment in preparation for an adult role.
– in the case of the two women, the inception or the strengthening of aspirations to more symmetrical and egalitarian partnership relationships and to a model of womanhood which provides for the fulfilment of the right to realise oneself professionally and to reconcile family and work
– an increase in self-esteem linked to the symbolic value of internationalisation in all fields (e.g. in Maria’s case, Erasmus meant having the possibility to improve her position in the family)
– a widening of horizons and borders within which identity can be built by overcoming social stigmatisation or social disapproval and the enlargement of one’s structure of choices
– the acquisition of social recognition through the acknowledgement of rights (more chances to access rights and benefits, for example for gay couples in the case of Marco and de facto partnerships in Nora’s).

In any case, the process of transformation of gender identity is part of a broader process of metamorphosis, that involves each aspect of life.

Another element that should be emphasised is that mobility does not always or necessarily imply geographical displacement. The case of Nora, for example, illustrates how the relationship with a foreign partner and the occasions for comparison with various models of family (for example through her relationship with her in-laws) has greatly contributed to remodelling her gender identity, although she continues to live in her country of origin. As Easthope observes, concerning the relationship between stability (the place, and the sense of belonging that accompanies it) and mobility (and the changes that this involves) in the identity-building processes “it is possible to understand one’s identity in terms of both place and mobility simultaneously and it is important not to prioritise one at the expense of the other becomes” [Easthope, 2009: 75]. Equating place with stability and mobility with change, in fact, would be a mistake because places are not stable in the sense of being static, and mobility does not necessarily imply change. In Easthope’s words, “Places... are constantly re-negotiated and understood in new ways by different people, or by the same people at different times”. In any case, in society “mobility itself has become normalized” so that “some people may feel ‘at home in movement’” [ibidem: 77].

Nora’s case allows us also to notice, among other things, that involvement in an intimate relationship with a foreign partner can have a drastic effect on the identity, considering the fact that loving relationships per se are endowed with the potential to transform. In the words of Person [Person, 1991: 22 in Thorsell, 2001: 131] “Romantic love offers not only momentary excitement but possibilities for a dramatic change of the I. Hence it is a powerful force for change”.
Drawing towards a conclusion, we turn our attention to one last aspect. Although at least two of the cases examined (Marco and Nora) can be considered “successful” pathways in terms of gender, the relationship between mobility and gender should in no way be conceptualised from a deterministic standpoint, whereby the experience of mobility brings with it the realisation of goals such as emancipation, modernisation and the recognition of rights. On the contrary, the cases analyzed in this study suggest that mobility should in no way be reified, assuming it to be a positive experience in itself.

First of all, behind the positive character of some tendencies (the ability to aspire, liberation from the social control of stigmatising contexts, the creation of symmetrical relationships) there is a passage from societies more subject to the limitations of tradition towards more modernised societies (South to North, East to West). There could be different results for movement in the opposite direction; without considering that, in the case of couples, one cannot exclude the possibility that the outcome of the relationship may be the traditionalisation of the male partner rather than the emancipation of the female partner. Therefore, the creation of equal relationships is not to be taken for granted in the least.

Secondly, it is not enough to move to countries where laws and institutions pursue gender equality and support emancipation in order to become emancipated. As Thorsell writes, “personal emancipation is in any case only meaningful in the fuller context of an individual project or biography” and “achieving equality between women and men, or facilitating independence from men, needs to be ‘rounded out’ with more cultural developments” [Thorsell, 2002: 145]. In the same way, not even changes of a cultural nature are enough in themselves to support authentic processes of emancipation. The case of Maria, for example, not only, as we have said, highlights the importance of cultural capital in the identification process, but it also demonstrates how the opening of a new perspective on life or a new vision of oneself as a result of a mobility experience may be only temporary when the original context does not support the work that has been carried out on one’s own identity.

Lastly, it should not be forgotten that, as our cases have shown, mobility, also when it constitutes a may of self-realisation and the remodelling of gender identity in line with one’s own desires, always involves biographical costs that are sometimes very painful.
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PLEĆ KULTUROWA I MOBILNOŚĆ W EUROPIE: ANALIZA TRZECH NARRACJI Z WŁOCH

(Streszczenie)

Płeć kulturowa jest szczególnie ważnym czynnikiem w kontekście kształtowania społeczno-kulturowych aspektów tożsamości narodowej. Jest to kwestia widoczna zwłaszcza w społeczeństwach o modelu patriarchalnym, gdzie dominują relacje nieegaliitarne, tak jak ma to miejsce w Europie Południowej. Problem ten coraz częściej poddawany jest refleksji, co prowadzi do znaczących transformacji tożsamości dzięki zintensyfikowaniu mobilności oraz dzięki procesom integracji i poszerzania europejskiej przestrzeni mentalnej. Mobilność może też inicjować proces (de) – (re) – konstrukcji tożsamości genderowej, redefinicję ról społecznych tradycyjnie przypisanych płci. Konfrontacja z odmiennymi wzorami może zmusić do stawiania pytania o własną tożsamość i konieczność jej przepracowania w wymiarze gender. W artykule na podstawie trzech narracji analizowane są takie okoliczności biograficzne, które mogą sprzyjać podjęciu wysiłku przepracowania własnej tożsamości.

Słowa kluczowe: mobilność, Europa, gender, tożsamość