

Victor Martinelli

Isabelle Calleja Ragonesi

The articles in this issue are a result of a number of papers presented at a conference that was held in Malta in December 2011 on Islands and Migration organized by the MIRIADE Network (A Network of researchers working on Irregular Migration in European Islands) and the Department of International Relations at the University of Malta. The Conference brought together a large number of papers that highlighted the impact of irregular migration on European Islands located at the periphery of Europe, and the first port of call for asylum seekers from the African continent making their way to the EU. The papers included here focus on the most exposed and vulnerable cohorts of asylum seekers, women and children, who find themselves in a position of double jeopardy, as asylum seekers in themselves constitute a vulnerable group.

Recent figures indicate that these two cohorts of asylum seekers are a growing percentage of all asylum seekers entering the EU. In 2011 and 2012 the percentage of minor asylum seekers entering the EU increased and currently stands at circa 27% of total numbers seeking asylum. In the case of women the figure has remained more constant at circa 30%. However while data indicates that a large number of minors (over 80%) are given some form of protection, in the case of women the figure is much lower. Indeed in the UK the chances of asylum being denied are twice as high for female refugees than for males. In 2011, some 19,000 people applied for asylum in the UK; 30 percent were women. While 41 percent of asylum applications from women were refused, for men it was 26 percent. Figures from the UK's Home Office show a similar trend for the past five years.

The asylum process is a key determinant. Women often apply for asylum on the basis of sexual persecution, however their stories are often not believed, and documentation illustrates that it is more difficult to prove sexual persecution than political persecution. In 2002 the International Refugee Convention was amended to

widen the definition of persecution and include that specific to women as a reason for asylum. Since then, asylum procedures attempt to include measures to assist women in making their asylum claim, such as providing female interviewers and interpreters. In May 2010, the European Commission presented an [action plan for unaccompanied minors](#) (COM(2010) 213 final), who are regarded as the most exposed and vulnerable victims of migration. The plan aimed at setting-up a coordinated approach and committed all EU Member States to granting high standards of reception, protection and integration for unaccompanied minors. As a complement to this action plan, the European migration network also produced a comprehensive [EU study on reception policies, as well as return and integration arrangements for unaccompanied minors](#).

The trauma of the journey and the asylum process for these cohorts however is only the beginning, for if successfully accomplished the next leg and equally challenging part of their journey then begins, that of integrating into the chosen host society. In conceptualising this process discourses have pointed to the important synergy between educational advancement and integration theories and by extension, unequal opportunities in education as a barrier to development and inclusion in wider society. Addressing these issues will increase the chances that migrants successfully negotiate this journey. This is crucial both for these vulnerable groups, and the receiving society, that has everything to gain by ensuring that the original protection offered to these groups, is then reinforced, by providing them with the tools to become happy, content, fruitful and productive citizens of the host society.

These issues are unwrapped and explored in the articles in this journal. The articles by Pisani and Cabrera deal with the sensitive and controversial issue of the asylum process. Pisani explores the case of sub-Saharan African female asylum seekers in Malta. In doing so she focuses on the need to understand the reasons why and how these women leave their home, and the trauma of fleeing violence, war and persecution, in order that they can be helped to convey the immediacy of these experience during the important process of submitting their asylum application. As Pisani rightly indicates this is “perhaps one of the most important processes that they will ever experience. A woman’s future, and that of her family, will to a certain degree, be determined by this process. Her ability to understand and play an active role in this process, then, must not be underestimated.” Her article thus looks at the learning needs that precede and strengthen the asylum interview, and then considers

the asylum process, in particular, the asylum interview and the educational relationship between the lawyer and the female asylum seeker, engaged in a mutual learning process towards freedom.

Cabrera deals with the same theme in his article on *Un-accompanied immigrant minors in the Canary islands*. Highlighting the fact, that the Islands, receive significant numbers of unaccompanied minors, the phenomenon he argued had resulted in the need to develop special protected status for unaccompanied migrant children. The article provides an overview of the relevant legislation, and policies on reception, return, and integration applicable to unaccompanied minors. In doing so Cabrera analyses the difficulties that policymakers encounter, as they address the phenomenon of child migration.

The other three articles in the journal focus on the second part of the migrant journey that of integration. All three articles deal with child migrants and the focal point of their integration, the educational process as a tool for these migrants to navigate the complexities and the demands of their new home. The articles by Spiteri, Calleja Ragonesi & Martinelli and Galea deal with the situation of young people, namely teenagers and school going children, and their success or otherwise at interacting culturally with the host nation. In, *When worlds meet*, the author identifies those issues that militate against the easy insertion of his participants in wider society and their successful inclusion in their environment. Indeed, the notion of social capital with all its implications is seen as fundamental for these individuals to eventually insert themselves in society, be this locally or in the receiving country if they are settled in a larger western country.

The same issue of social capital underlies the study by Ragonesi and Martinelli, who focus on the difficulties that Somali children encounter when attending school in Malta, and how they and their families attempt to deal with these challenges. These children are for the time being at least, settled in a system, but unfortunately it is a system which remains largely closed to them. The fact that most Somali children's parents are largely illiterate and cannot communicate with their children's teachers, with all the implications that illiteracy and incommunicability bring with them, leads to misunderstanding and misconceptions and ultimately a lost opportunity to

capitalize on precious human capital. This is to say nothing of the human capital that is the parents.

Galea's paper problematises discourses on integration and their claims for accommodating difference, and the implications they pose in conceptualising the education of young migrant women. She argues that the EU integration philosophy reflects a politics of assimilation that does not allow an educational process that focuses on becoming an individual with all the differences that that may imply. Galea emphasizes the importance of the processes of migration, rather than those of integration, as important sources in conceptualising education as a system of transformation where becoming a different and unique woman, true to ones origins remains possible.

All articles hesitantly chart a way forward to address the issue of social capital and the understanding of essentially alien systems. In Spiteri's case, he promotes the notion of guided interaction between youths from different cultures including the host culture in a bid to foster resilience, reduce stereotyping and engender communication and ultimately connectedness. In Ragonesi and Martinelli's case, after exploring the needs of the participants' families, they suggest specific procedures to be introduced in the educational system to compensate for the beneficiaries' lack of connectedness and isolation. In Galea's paper the focus is on allowing the girl migrant to develop her own sense of worth and identity which she can then utilize in order to communicate with and transform the alien system she finds herself in. Pisani advocates a reassessment of the asylum process, in order that it becomes a pedagogical tool both for those seeking entry to a new community, and those receiving the new entrants transforming both groups in the process. Finally Cabrera emphasizes the importance of the legal system and corollary rights in ensuring the protection, well-being and integration of minors within the union, and the importance of adapting the system of law in the Canary Islands in order to cater for the needs of these new vulnerable inhabitants. Live in fragments no longer. Only connect... (E.M. Forster, *Howards End*).