

# Ghanaian Migrants to Italy as *Agents of Change*? Making Sense of Gender Hierarchies and Development Discourses

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## **Introduction**

The migration-development nexus has gained remarkable currency in southern European countries in recent years, with transmigrants' economic and political engagement emerging as a new policy field (Østergaard-Nielsen 2011). International organisations celebrate migrants' associations and remittances as significant agents of development or "agents of change". With their bifocal knowledge of social contexts, migrants are daily brokers of representations (Bierschenk, Chauveau & Olivier de Sardan 2000), cultural codes (Lewis & Mosse 2006) and resources, and as such have the potential to become new development brokers. Olivier de Sardan (2008) has defined development brokers as attracting and mediating development aid, addressing it in local arenas where they promote actions and consequently acquire social prestige (Marabello 2013).

Examining a co-development project named *Ghanacoop* involving Ghanaian migrants to Italy, this article explores how institutionally driven discourses of gender equality and women's empowerment (Kabeer 1994; Parpart, Rai & Staudt 2002) are mirrored, brokered and translated (Lewis & Mosse 2006). Empowerment has become a widely popular term, adopted by institutions, international organisations, NGOs, radical movements and migrants as development agents. Despite its popularity, empowerment acquires multiple meanings in relation to global discourses, national forces and local translations (Marchand & Parpart 1995). This paper analyses ethnographic materials<sup>1</sup> through the lens of anthropological literature on Akan family idioms in order to link discourses, practices, and processes of making sense of gender norms and narratives. The argument

builds on Sahlins's notion of hierarchical solidarity (1986), applying this concept to marriage in search of an analytical tool to explicate the gendered hierarchies performed by the research participants and incorporate the emic point of view.

This paper illustrates how diaspora engagement in development does not produce democracy, gender equality and bottom-up participation *per se*; rather, it generates representations of these. The first section provides a theoretical framework of the notion of co-development in relation to the debate on development, focusing on gender as a development tool. In doing so, migration and development studies are brought together with research on Akan in an effort to reveal the complex transnational scenario in which Ghanaian migrants' practices, imaginaries and actions take on shape and meaning. The article then presents data on Ghanaian migration to Italy as well as the co-development project funded by the Migration for Development in Africa (MIDA) Ghana-Senegal Programme and run by the International Organisation for Migration (IOM). The second section analyses how migrants, as new cultural and social brokers, perform gender relations on the development stage, enacting a flexible politics of belonging (Kleist 2013) to both their countries of origin and destination. Despite the supposed characterization of migrants engaged in development as "agents of change", this ethnography clearly shows that Ghanaian migrants translate gender meanings, representations and practices, re-arranging development discourses and historical and social practices of conjugality.

### **Theoretical background**

The process of progressively institutionalizing gender equality and women's empowerment in development has been examined in depth (Marchand & Parpart 1995; Momsen 2004; Mohanty 2012). The variety of ways in which gender has been operationalised attests to the fact that gender is often employed as a merely descriptive category, thus minimising the contested and political character of relations between women and men. An extensive literature (Kabeer 2005; Porter & Sweetman 2005; Cornwall 2007) suggests that mainstream gender has become a "hollow" discourse, a simplified and bureaucratic device for development.

Building on this insight, anthropology has focused on gender as produced by contesting social, historical and political arenas, thereby shedding light on the social processes that are legitimised, claimed or concealed by development actors' discourses. A brief outline of the debate on development discourses, which is largely taken for granted for

the purposes of my argument here, is in order. The Foucauldian idea of discourse is useful for analysing what is represented through language. Escobar (1995) addresses development discourses from an avowedly political perspective, arguing that the Third World has been produced by development discourses and that anthropology should consequently unmask the institutional and bureaucratic process of constructing “development”. On the other hand, Ferguson (1994) argues that development discourses must be considered in relation to non-discursive practices and institutions. Ferguson’s attention to field research shows how development functions in specific circumstances, calling for a multilevel analysis in which imaginary, development policies and the language of modernity are relationally constituted. «Development discourses that identify legitimate ways of thinking, practising, and speaking of development» (Grillo & Stirrat 1997: 12) are performed and displayed by migrants as new development brokers. Migrants thus enact repertoires of representations of modernity, development and society, navigating between institutional actors’ discourses, international programmes and local expectations that are «tightly bound up with the question of inequality, aspiration and a rank in an imagined world» (Ferguson 2006: 19).

Co-development, sometimes defined as translocal development (Grillo & Riccio 2004), is a concrete expression of migrants’ political engagement. Ostensibly, it is based on a strong political commitment to social justice and a redefinition of “national community” as extending across existing borders. Multiple subjects participate in co-development, including local state institutions, civil society groups, international organisations and migrants’ associations. As Ferguson claims (2006), co-development therefore allows us to explore the topographies of power, examining relations between migrant’s organisations, societies and states at local and transnational levels. Furthermore, co-development reveals how some of the fine-sounding words used in development policies, such as participation, empowerment and civil society, end up being translated. These development terms share a wide consensus, making them key for development policy actors to gain access, visibility and legitimacy (Cornwall 2007). These buzzwords can be dismissed as no more than rhetoric. Despite being rhetorical, however, such terms have lost their concrete referents, leaving them open to be filled in by their users. «In the struggles for interpretive power that characterise the negotiation of the language of policy, buzzwords shelter multiple agendas, providing room for manoeuvre» (Cornwall 2007: 474). Defining the co-development project as an arena for contesting gender practices and representations, I explore Ghanaian migrants’ arrangement and translation of development

jargon and cultural contexts of migration, paying particular attention to their contexts of origin.

Family and gender relations in Ghana have been key points of historical, anthropological and economic research. Allman and Tashjian (2000) explain that the marriage contract between Asante is based on the exchange of resources and work between men and women. Men gain the right to call on the labour of their wives and women, in providing work and domestic services, expected to receive clothes, food crops or, in the case of migration, remittances in exchange. Coe (2011) suggests that long-term co-habitation in a single household has not been a significant feature of family life and marriage has been maintained through a continual exchange of responsibilities, obligations and duties; consequently, in her view migration *per se* does not challenge family organisation. Scholars have interpreted the separate budget and differential access to material resources, together with certain economic spheres such as trade, perceived as typical female activities (Overa 2007), as a source of women's material power within the family and community. On the other hand, female traders have been stigmatised and even persecuted as destroyers of the national economy. Describing the historical continuities from colonialism to the period of structural adjustment, Clark (2001) emphasises that widespread hostility towards women traders should be explained through gender identities and role changes. The author particularly stresses that it is the wealth of wives –rather than mothers or sisters – that men view with suspicion. Not only does wealth increase a wife's autonomy, but also the money will eventually be inherited by her lineage rather than his (Clark 2001: 305). Historical studies aimed at identifying forms and practices of female authority have identified the colonial era, with its legislation on the inheritance and persecution of unmarried women, as a crucial period of women's subordination. In brief, two tendencies can be identified in the complexity of historical perspectives. On one hand, taking into consideration marriage and the division of labour, studies have emphasised complementariness (Robertson 1984) and solidarity between men and women. On the other hand, differentiated spheres of social action, social status and the tension between matrilineal principle and patrilineal descent have been exacerbated.

Regarding studies of contemporary Ghanaian migration, several publications reveal how migration has challenged (Manuh 2001; Arthur 2008; Coe 2011) changed (Wong 2006) or reproduced gender relations by affecting remittance transfers (Van Naerssen *et al.* 2015). However, studies on family and religion suggest that Pentecostal Churches have shaped ideas about the individual and family within migration, helping Ghanaians to integrate into European contexts (Van Dijk 2002). Meanwhile, Newell (2005)

has noted that Pentecostal Churches are developing new ideas regarding marriage and wifely submission. These contradictory findings reveal that gender is a constitutive key point for migration. Instead of treating gender as simply a variable of social relations, ethnographic research reveals how, in a more praxis-oriented perspective, gender constitutes a process wherein fluid identities, relations, and ideologies are negotiated through practices, discourses and conflicting interests (Mahler & Pessar 2006).

### **Notes on Ghanaian migration to Italy**

Ghanaians have reached Mediterranean countries through different routes, motivations and migration trajectories (Arthur 2008; Lucht 2012). The statistical data show a Ghanaian presence in Sicily, Campania and several areas of northern Italy. Of the Italian regions, Emilia Romagna has the second largest number of foreign citizen resident<sup>2</sup> and the highest percentage<sup>3</sup> of foreign residents in its population. There are just over twelve thousand<sup>4</sup> Ghanaians residing in Emilia Romagna, a population demographically balanced in terms of gender. Just over half<sup>5</sup> of the total number of Ghanaians residing in the region live in the province of Modena.

With the exception of some Ghanaian women arriving in Italy alone or as first migrants, the majority are secondary migrants arriving through family reunification. In Italy they attempt to conciliate their motherhood and child-rearing duties with paying jobs. In the first period of migration they usually spent their time and efforts raising their children, learning Italian and doing informal work in their spare time. Child fostering practices are not common among Ghanaian migrants to Emilia Romagna, though a few cases have been observed as an effect of the recent economic recession that is changing some migratory trajectories and livelihoods. The Ghanaian women in Modena mostly work in local cooperatives, providing services (cleaning hospitals etc.), or in manufacturing; some also work in the agricultural sector and food processing plants. Thanks to the legislative recognition of educational qualifications in healthcare professions, a few have recently carved out a labour niche for themselves as nurses and health service assistants, thus experiencing upward social mobility.

Modena's Ghanaian inhabitants are organised in several associations, with the strongest and most visible being the local branch of the Ghana National Association. In 2002, with the support of the Italian Ministry of Foreign Affairs, the IOM launched a programme involving Ghanaians and Senegalese migrants to Italy (MIDA Ghana-Senegal). The programme aimed to contribute to the socio-economic development of the migrants' countries of origin by implementing new income-generating enterprises as well as sustainable rural development programmes. Following the

evaluation process, the *Ghanacoop* project was the most publicised and best-known of the twelve projects selected.

### ***Ghanacoop*: a co-development project**

*Ghanacoop* was formerly a cooperative agro-food company engaged in import-export between Ghana and Italy. The members of the organisation, called *soci*, participate in the internal democratic elections, approve the annual financial balance sheet and influence the management's decisions.

*Ghanacoop* was founded in 2004 as part of the Ghana National Association of Modena. After falling victim to a scam the cooperative was closed in 2010. Over the years *Ghanacoop* developed a range of relations with important national and regional economic actors on the Italian side; it was also involved in several education and healthcare development projects on the Ghanaian side. Engagement with the country of origin, which mobilises the moral community of diasporic actors (Werbner 2002), was shaped by an entrepreneurial idiom. The supposedly entrepreneurial rather than political nature of *Ghanacoop* allowed it access to the public sphere in both countries.

On an international level, *Ghanacoop* proved its commitment as a development broker by participating in important international conferences and workshops organised by the United Nations Institute for Training and Research (UNITAR) or IOM. In Italy, *Ghanacoop* appears to have emerged as a political actor due to the type of projects it implemented and the character of organisational communication. In Ghana, *Ghanacoop* interacted with traditional Ghanaian political institutions at the local level – namely *chiefs*<sup>6</sup> – not only as mediator but also as a decision-maker. Nonetheless, the political authority it acquired was constantly played down. The cooperative's image, as well as its identity and social activity, were built around what has been defined as «diasporic charity ritual» (Nieswand 2008).

The polymorphous character of the organisation, engaged with state institutions, international organisations and civil society, enabled *Ghanacoop* leaders to produce and display a variety of social practices and representations. This paper specifically illustrates representations of, and negotiations surrounding, gender identities and relations as well as women's empowerment.

### **Enrolling wives: a strategy of empowerment?**

*Ghanacoop* has been celebrated as a concrete example of migrants' engagement aimed at social change. Enrolling women as organisation members and/or beneficiaries was considered – in the narratives, at least

– a strategy for pursuing gender equality as defined by international and national institutions. In both development and European policies, the keys to eliminating gender disparities are education, access to employment and political participation, emphasised in various ways.

In presenting an ethnography of *Ghanacoop*, I seek to deconstruct the notion of gender equality by framing it in the social practices, cultural codes and political deployments of migration. I outline and discuss gender representations through an exploration of extracts<sup>7</sup> from interviews with all of *Ghanacoop*'s female members and several key figures (the organisation's leader and a supportive local politician) and reference to fieldwork notes. Although the biographies of the women interviewed are highly varied, some repeated elements reveal common aspirations, a shared sense of participation linked to family reputation and reflections on gender relations. In order to reveal the *Ghanacoop* process of encoding and translating gender equality, I describe overlaps and discrepancies, scrutinising them and linking them to the practices and social norms of migration as well as the country of origin.

### *Ghanacoop's women: words and biographies*

S: "Why did you decide to be part of *Ghanacoop*?"

Rita: *Ghanacoop* belongs to the Ghanaian community of Modena, my husband has an important role in the community. Naturally, I had to become a "socia", especially when they asked for women's participation. I am very proud to be part of the project; I feel I am doing something for my people here and in my country.

S: Who was asking for women's participation?

Rita: Our leaders. They said that we are the diaspora, and as such we need to do something for women to become a trustworthy organisation in Italy.

S: What do you do in the organisation?

Rita: As a "socia" I contributed money to the organisation. I help them when they need it. Sometimes I go to the town supermarket or some commercial or charity fairs selling pineapples; other times I help when they need someone to cook during special events. I have my work and my family, but I like to help with the project. I go every time they need help, my husband calls me and I go. It is my commitment to my country. You see... I have a role as a wife in my community, in the church. Ghanaians talk too much, I don't want people to talk about us... And I hope that other women will come to help their husbands; helping each other is a good thing. Ghanaian men like to have their wives behind them, to feel that their wives are supportive and respectful.

S: Do you go for the annual meeting to approve the organisation's balance?

Rita: Yes, I can vote and decide. I vote as my husband says to, he knows what to do and I don't. I trust him and we help each other. In the church, we constantly repeat that marriage means helping each other, especially when you emigrate and live in Europe. Italian women help their husbands as much as they can... (Interview, Modena 7 January 2009).

*S: How did you decide to join Ghanacoop?*

*Shelley: I didn't decide, my husband signed me up and paid the money to allow me to become a "socia". I think that it is a good initiative; I help my husband whenever I can. With my job (I am a nurse) it is not easy but I always help cook for special events. I am happy to do something for my people in Ghana, but I'm doing it mainly for my husband. He was unlucky at first in Italy, but now, through the project, he is able to become an entrepreneur, an important man with a good job. He was so happy when the project started. He had the opportunity to meet politicians, entrepreneurs, the Italian Prime Minister and the former president of the UN... It is unbelievable to have such a chance in Italy where the people run away when they see you. When they see black people they hold on to their bags tightly... I have to support my husband to enable him to have a good reputation in the community – it is important to show that your wife is close to you (Interview, Modena 10 march 2009).*

*Gloria: I paid my money and I became a "socia", as association secretary it was my duty to be part of Ghanacoop. I think it is a great opportunity for our community and I have the utmost respect for my uncle. Thanks to him I have been elected secretary of the association. I used to work in a factory and, until I became pregnant, I worked during my free time in the organisation, but now with my baby and job I cannot afford to go. I don't go to the meetings; they call me when I have to go, or if I have to talk to journalists. I don't know exactly what decisions they are making. During the meetings I go along with what my uncle and the president say... and I vote.*

*S: Do they ask you to vote as they say to? Do you agree with them?*

*Gloria: They didn't ask anything, but I trusted them and I am respectful; I am a young woman and I arrived only a few years ago, they know what are the right things to do (Interview, Modena 1 september 2009).*

*S: Why did you decide to join Ghanacoop?*

*Oforiwa: I hoped to find a job. My husband came home and said that a new enterprise had started up and that only Ghanatians could participate. We thought this would give us an opportunity, and then my husband made the contribution for three people -himself, our eldest son and myself-*

*All of us are "soci" and we all hope to have a proper job in the future. Right now, we try to help whenever they need us. I go when my husband calls me.*

*S: Do you go to the meetings?*

*Oforiwa: No, I trust the president and my husband, they are close friends and they talk to each other, I don't know anything about business.*

*S: Did you take part in the meeting when they talked about Ghana development plans?*

*Oforiwa: I know that we are doing some charity; I know that we send some goods and provide electricity to a small village. With our sacrifices, we are doing something for our country.*

*S: Do you know anything else about the village?*

*Oforiwa: I know that it is somewhere near Accra, we are also hoping to build a hospital...we are doing what we can; our life here in Italy is not so easy. Just yesterday my sister called me asking for money but I don't have any to send back. I have to ask my husband to do it and since there is a crisis in Italy, it is better to avoid*



*sending money. We don't have enough for ourselves. I am happy to be in the project, my husband helps any time he can, he is proud to be part of it, we have a picture of my husband with Prodi<sup>8</sup>. Can you imagine this opportunity to be close to such an important person? One day all of our husbands will become important in Ghana and maybe in Italy as well* (Interview, Modena 31 august 2009).

Although the women's accounts appear similar, their daily lives and life-experiences are actually rather different. Rita (pseudonym) maintained a good social network amongst both Ghanaians and Italians. She was employed by a cleaning service, seeing it as an opportunity to work while also taking care of her family. The role of wife and mother was central to her daily routine. Rita participated in the activities of two Ghanaian associations, the local branch of the Ghanaian association and the hometown association, but she spent most of her time during the week taking care of her family. Shelley (pseudonym) had previously held a good job in Ghana, and was one of four siblings. Although all were educated, she was the only one to emigrate. Despite not wanting to leave her country, she decided to follow her husband to Italy. Shortly after arriving in Italy she gave birth to her first child and spent this early period trying to learn Italian and get her educational qualifications recognised. She worked at a variety of different jobs before finally gaining a position as a nurse. In her view, life in Italy was only temporary: she wanted to return to her homeland together with her husband in a few years, before the children grew up. Gloria (pseudonym), a young woman, had also not wanted to emigrate but had arrived in Modena through family reunification to live with her parents and her sister, who was born in Italy. Her uncle performed some of the duties connected with his role in the matrilineal system, offering her, as the eldest niece, a chance to join the association and the *Ghanacoop* organisation. The last interviewee, Oforiwa (pseudonym), felt isolated in her Italian life. She did not speak Italian and preferred the life she had previously led in the south of Italy. Although she had experienced greater poverty in the south, she felt her social life there had been better. Before immigrating to Italy Oforiwa had gotten married in Ghana; there, she did not work and was completely dependent on her husband's earnings. With the exception of Gloria, all three women were Catholic and met in church every Sunday. Indeed, the social network of the Catholic Church was intertwined with *Ghanacoop* membership and partnership.

These women's interviews illustrate a variety of representations and perceptions of their lives in Italy, generational and educational backgrounds as well as perspectives on life and migratory trajectories. Nonetheless, all of them connected their participation in the *Ghanacoop* project to their conjugal or kinship relationships. Although formally entitled to do so, the women did not actively participate in decision-making processes.

The majority were wives of male members, wives in a new and dislocated diasporic elite. The entrepreneurial nature of the project and the social status of their relatives were mentioned as reasons for their sacrifice and commitment.

*Women and men: some interpretative snapshots*

External observers, economic partners and local institutions considered women's enrolment in the organisation to be a chance for empowerment and inclusion to the Italian social context. However, the women never described their participation as facilitating new access to social networks, resources or opportunities. Rather, they attributed their participation to their roles as wives engaged in discouraging gossip and enhancing their husbands' social status. «Among the Ghanaian migrants a combination of gossip, shaming and ostracism is commonly used by female informal groups to exercise social control» (Arthur 2008: 60). In this case social pressure, often successfully used to encourage family members to fulfil family expectations, serves to strengthen the marriage and couple relationship.

Participant observation revealed how men and women involved in *Ghanacoop* performed their respective gender roles. In the public space of social events or conferences, where *Ghanacoop* men alternatively spoke on behalf of the Ghanaian community in Italy or the diaspora, the leaders in particular were dressed in a Western style while Ghanaian women in the organisation magnificently bedecked themselves as "Other". It was the women who provided the shimmering appearance of "Ghanaianness" through their clothing and hairstyles (Taussig 1993). Public events involved a hierarchical male/female division of labor in which women were tasked with representing and embodying *Ghanaianness* while smiling and selling products and men re-produced discourses of empowerment and market practice, displaying a clever grasp and combination of social and cultural skills. Such naturalisation and gendering of behaviours, tasks and attitudes corresponded to trans-local expectations and obscured power inequalities. Nevertheless, the leaders' wives explain that migration to Italy requires them to uphold a commitment to the conjugal relationship. The couple's reciprocity is referred to as an Italian social norm, as a new and peculiar behaviour inherent in being a "good migrant family".

In the women's words, public events became a chance to showcase their closeness as a married couple in the eyes of the Ghanaian community in Italy. While women defined their engagement and participation according to the social code of marriage, men, including Italian interlocutors and observers, addressed female participation in co-development as potentially

empowering. In particular, the discourses of *Ghanacoop*'s male leaders, addressed to international organisations and Italian institutional actors, emphasised the potential of women's empowerment as a fundamental principle of the organisation.

*S: Was there any pressure from the IOM or Italian partners to enrol women?*

*Alex: No, but it is clear that Ghanacoop needs to demonstrate that it believes in progress, in taking care of community needs, in gender equality and social development. Progress, development and equal opportunities are related to our mission and commitment as migrants. They are related to our know-how as the Ghanaian diaspora. The women are important in our community, we take care of them, and when it is necessary, we speak on behalf of them.*

*Ghanacoop is an enterprise, but we are deciding to send some money to help a new project in Ghana. We would like to buy some palm oil from a women's group in the Volta Region. Also in the village, we enrol a number of women as farmers and workers. Through business we want to export development and gender equality to Ghana.*

*S. Why is it that the women enrolled in Ghanacoop are formally "socie", but do not actively participate in the decision-making process? Why are most of them wives of male "soci"?*

*Alex: The women can participate and vote. Sometimes they do not want to. They prefer to ask their husbands what to do. It is something new for all of us... The enrolled women gave us money to become "socie", together with their husbands they wanted to do something for their country. They are important women within the Ghanaian community here in Modena and they are our wives, but they set a good example for other women, for the next generation (Interview, Modena 12 april 2009).*

This description by the leader of the organisation clearly suggests that *Ghanacoop* adopted the idea that development is the responsibility of new migrants. Its entrepreneurial character allows the migrant's organisation to represent the market as an opportunity for social change, simultaneously facilitating migrants' commitment and women's empowerment. However, shifting the focus from discourse to concrete actions reveals somewhat different facts. The project to buy palm oil from the women's group was never actually initiated and the female workers, involved in the village of Gomoa Simbrofo, were paid a very low wage, half of a farmer's daily wage. Formally, both men and women were involved in the project, but the women, whether *socie* or workers, were always a step behind the men. Despite their participation, the women depended on the men to make decisions, vote and run the project. Specifically, *Ghanacoop* – simultaneously an entrepreneurial subject and a political actor involved in social change – performed gender equality in certain ways: it was discursively narrated and formally established but neither practised nor truly encouraged in everyday activities.

Analysing the discourses of different social actors involved, explicitly asked about gender equality, helps to complete the picture. In discussing women's involvement in the project, local politicians tended to underline the potential empowerment of the women. In their view, the project's success and economic investment allowed women to gain a new position in both the Ghanaian community and Italian society. At the same time, however, they did not consider gender equality a major issue, stressing that the project's real value lay in migrants' engagement and skill-building as agents of their own development. Gender equality, in their words, was a social process that would derive from the economic, social and political inclusion of migrant collectives. In addition, when asked to comment on the endogamous kinship relations between organisation members, they replied by defining the Ghanaian family as similar to the Italian nuclear family. The presumed correlation between the two familial models justified women's enrolment as a first step towards their incorporation into the Italian social context. A local Modena politician with a central role in supporting the project explained his view as follows:

*If you look at surveys regarding social services and family reunifications, you can see that Ghanaians are organised in families (the married couple with children). Sporadically, you will find a Ghanaian who asks for social services. The Ghanaian social network provides Ghanaian migrants with an efficient emergency safety net. Ghanaian men work in factories, but now they are becoming entrepreneurs, they are good migrants. They are not involved in crime and they have good relations with institutions. Ghanaian women do not speak Italian. Ghanacoop is a real chance for them to get to know other people, to change or start a job...*

*They say that family is extended, but their idea of family is very similar to our idea of it. The young generations are enrolled in school and the Ghanaians are mostly good and respectful students. From my point of view, the Ghanaians have a cultural background and the desire to be fully integrated into Italian society.*

*Thanks to Ghanacoop, as migrants they are potentially becoming the new ruling class of Italy, the ruling class of the future. Thus, it makes no sense to measure gender equality in and of itself; the Ghanacoop project is more ambitious. Women are participating and it is not important who these women are, but that gender equality is one of the organisation's principles (Interview, Modena 8 July 2007; personal communication, Bologna 14 september 2007).*

Gender equality apparently represents a blueprint to be deployed and displayed. The idea of equality was affirmed as part of a dominant development narrative, but each of the interlocutors de-codified it differently. Italian social and political actors saw Ghanaian women's participation as a first step towards empowerment. The organisation leaders reproduced the discourses of development agencies and Italian

institutions by bringing their wives into the cooperative in a sort of formal gender equity. Women, on the other hand, explained their participation in development by referencing ideas of marriage and family depicted as having been acquired through migration. In doing so, they legitimised gendered political asymmetries, sketching a context-appropriate reason for their participation in the co-development initiative.

### Marriage codes and discourses

The female members' perspectives offer an opportunity to explore how gender relations and norms are adjusted in the social contexts of migration by investigating their discursive representations of marital roles. It might be argued that the *Ghanacoop* project was a very short-lived experience and consequently wives were only involved in the development stage of the organisation. My aim, however, is to show how wives' enrolment in the organisation corresponded to a specific re-framing of the meanings of gender equality as Ghanaian migrants moulded and displayed contextually specific ideas of marriage and development discourses.

By exploring the relative applicability of the notion of *hierarchical solidarity of marriage*, gender relations and visions of marriage in Akan and contemporary Ghanaian migrations aid in deconstructing the social norms being performed. Although coined to analyse social cohesion and power in a very different context, Sablins' notion of hierarchical solidarity has been applied to personal dependence relations (Viti 2007) as a descriptive model for interpreting *longue durée* social practices. This notion might cautiously be applied to conjugal relations as well, with a view to incorporating the emic perspective and revealing how actors re-arrange the array of meanings surrounding family relations within migration and development. For Ghanaian women in Italy, husband-wife relations were altered by the experience of migration, reinforcing (at least in their representations) practices of mutual aid. Pre-emigration social norms concerning gender and marriage assumed new features and codes. A wife's respect and helpfulness were granted increased value in relation to the Italian cultural landscape as well as the Catholic context. Within the Ghanaian social group in Modena, two simultaneous ongoing processes could be observed: the nuclearisation of the family and the construction of transnational households that establish their boundaries and membership according to the transfer of symbolic and material resources. Italian interlocutors denied that the families of Ghanaian migrants were undergoing historical and cultural change. Italian institutions represent the Ghanaian family as a site of cooperation and harmonious relations between genders and generations, and as essentially

nuclear. In this perspective, statistical data on family reunifications as well as Ghanaians' tight social network generate an image of the family as an efficient, cooperative and peaceful social body compatible with the local context. Although one could argue that not even the contemporary Italian family actually corresponds to such a model, this romantic if not downright stereotypical representation is highly pertinent in the Italian political debate on family composition. The simplistic idea of the nuclear family as depicted and discursively employed by Ghanaian women appears to constitute a site of cultural negotiation for inclusion. The multiple elements deployed (naturalisation of the nuclear family, overlap between family and household and the presumed cooperative redistribution of resources within it) not only conceal existing ties, they also generate a social representation that, in the view of Ghanaian groups, is suited to the Italian context. Furthermore, through the process of de-codifying familial ideas and discourses, Ghanaians participate in the dominant discourse, thus becoming new actors in the production of social meaning.

Although Ghanaians offered multiple divergent pictures, gender relations within *Ghanacoop* re-define women as dependent on men. More precisely, as wives of the newly dislocated elite, women contribute to strengthening their husbands' authority within their communities of origin and immigration. The recent history of Ghanaian women and political movements can shed some light on the relation between conjugal practices and development rhetoric promoting women's empowerment. Moreover, the genealogy of narratives on marriage and conjugal duties such as those described by *Ghanacoop* can be traced through an examination of what Mama (1995) has defined as "femocracy". The author analyses a political movement called the *3<sup>rd</sup> December Movement* founded in 1982 and finds that the state's efforts to appropriate "gender ideas" under Rawlings were largely facilitated by his wife's leadership of this movement, which later became the women's wing of the government. Although it attracted both external and internal funding, supported by United Nations agencies on the grounds that it appeared to be pro-women, it did not achieve any substantial changes in the status of women. Rather, Mama (*ibidem*) shows that the movement was ruled by a small clique of women whose authority derived from being married to powerful men, thereby serving to uphold the patriarchal *status quo* (*ibidem*).

Examining postcolonial development in African gender politics, I would highlight the political use of the conjugal role in recent Ghanaian history and emphasize that the *Ghanacoop* project and its members act within a plurality of discursive repertoires on marriage, political action, and gender empowerment. On this basis, Ghanaian migrants developed a complex idiom to accommodate authority, modernity and hierarchy.

Nonetheless, concrete practices as well as the multiple representations of marriage in political rhetoric reveal that gender equality is postulated, mirrored and narrated rather than enacted.

## Conclusion

Migrants as development actors appear to collapse the distinction between indigenous and western scientific knowledge (Hobart 1993). However, the process of knowledge development (Yarrow 2011), representations of the socio-cultural landscape of belonging and discursive production can be observed as sites and effects of brokerage. Indeed, co-development enacts representations of development, the roles of political institutions and languages and social strategies for belonging to multiple migration contexts. As an actor in the migration-development arena, *Ghanacoop* linked its gender discourses to global issues such as migrants' political engagement and, by mirroring different social actors' perspectives and expectations, demonstrated a capacity to identify global, national and local discourses on gender and development. Ghanaian migrants appropriated and re-shaped heterogeneous discourses and performed conflicting gender representations within a transnational scenario of development engagement. Nonetheless, interviews with female *Ghanacoop* members reveal that gender roles, though framed as an acquisition of migration, actually echoed Akan familial representations combining hierarchy, solidarity and social aspirations. Applying the notion of hierarchical solidarity to marriage therefore helps explain the translation of gender asymmetry in the transnational public sphere of co-development. By brokering migration-related gender norms and development epistemologies (ibidem), *Ghanacoop* gained legitimacy to act as a development agent and, as such, a supposed "agent of change". However, the process of making sense of gender relations and marriage representations shows a complex re-arrangement of contextual norms, development discourses and political meanings. Though proclaimed as a guiding principle, empowerment was deprived of effectiveness, ending up as neither an actual political goal nor an organisational practice. Women's participation based exclusively on conjugal and kinship relations activated a complex transnational political repertoire of meaning that prevented real empowerment and/or gender equality. Although co-development has the potential to intersect power relations and configurations (Riccio 2011) and allow new political subjects to redistribute material and immaterial resources, this case study reveals its weakness in destabilising gendered hierarchies and inequalities. Paradoxically, in translating development discourses and claiming social change, Ghanaian migrants asserted gender

asymmetries that were unchanged if not actually strengthened. This paper thus shows how gender practices and discourses pull in opposite directions and argues that co-development does not, *per se*, involve a process of dismantling power-based asymmetries.

### Note

1. The research, based on 18 months of fieldwork, was carried out in Italy and Ghana in 2007-2009.

2. Foreign citizens residing in Emilia Romagna: 547.552 (Osservatorio Regionale Fenomeno Migratorio 2014).

3. Foreign residents account for 12.2% of the total population (Osservatorio Regionale Fenomeno Migratorio 2014).

4. Recorded Ghanaian residents of Emilia Romagna: 12.528, 41.21% of which are women (Osservatorio Regionale Fenomeno Migratorio 2014).

5. There are 6,548 Ghanaians residing in Modena, 2,604 of which are women (Osservatorio Regionale Fenomeno Migratorio 2014).

6. The issue of chieftainship and development cannot be addressed here (see Marabello 2012), *inter alia* see Valsecchi, P. 2003. "Kingship, chieftaincy and politics: a view from Nzema (Ghana)" in *Le retour des rois. Les autorités traditionnelles et l'Etat en Afrique* Perrot, C. H. & Fauvelle-Aymar, F. X. (ed.) pp. 82-83. Paris: Karthala.

7. Material dealing with gender issues has been selected from the fifty-eight longitudinal and in-depth interviews conducted.

8. Former Italian Prime Minister Romano Prodi.

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## Riassunto

*Le politiche e le iniziative di co-sviluppo, pur potenzialmente incorporando idee di democrazia, partecipazione e impegno sociale, si caratterizzano per l'eterogeneità e la poliedricità. Attraverso un progetto di co-sviluppo, denominato Ghanacoop, di cui sono protagonisti i migranti ghanesi in Italia, si analizza il processo di accomodazione delle norme sociali sui generi. Lo iato tra le narrazioni e le pratiche che questi nuovi broker agiscono nell'arena dello sviluppo è al centro dell'analisi, che focalizza l'attenzione sui modi di elaborazione del legame coniugale ed empowerment delle donne. Quest'articolo, che si basa su una ricerca etnografica e incrocia i più recenti studi sulle migrazioni ghanesi con alcuni contributi storico-antropologici sull'area Akan, osserva come i ruoli coniugali siano stati messi in scena e agiti acquisendo significato politico. L'intento, dunque, è quello di svelare i processi operati da Ghanacoop nel rispecchiare e tradurre i discorsi di sviluppo istituzionali sull'empowerment delle donne leggendone le prassi di ri-significazione.*

*Parole chiave:* co-sviluppo, genere e rappresentazioni familiari, migrazione ghanese, broker dello sviluppo.

## Abstract

*Potentially embodying ideas of democracy, participation and social engagement, co-development policies and initiatives are multi-faceted and heterogeneous. This paper explores Ghanacoop, a co-development project involving Ghanaian migrants to Italy, analysing cultural frictions and arrangements concerning gender norms. The gap between gender narratives and the practices these new brokers perform in the development arena are investigated anthropologically, focusing on the process of re-framing gender and family representations. Migration and Akan studies intertwine to investigate Ghanaian *longue durée* practices and idioms of conjugality. Based on ethnographic research, this article shows how marital roles are displayed and concretely enacted within the project, acquiring political meaning. In so doing, it reveals how Ghanacoop mirrored and translated development institutions' discourses on gender equality and women's empowerment.*

*Key words:* Co-development, gender and family representations, Ghanaian migrations, development brokers.