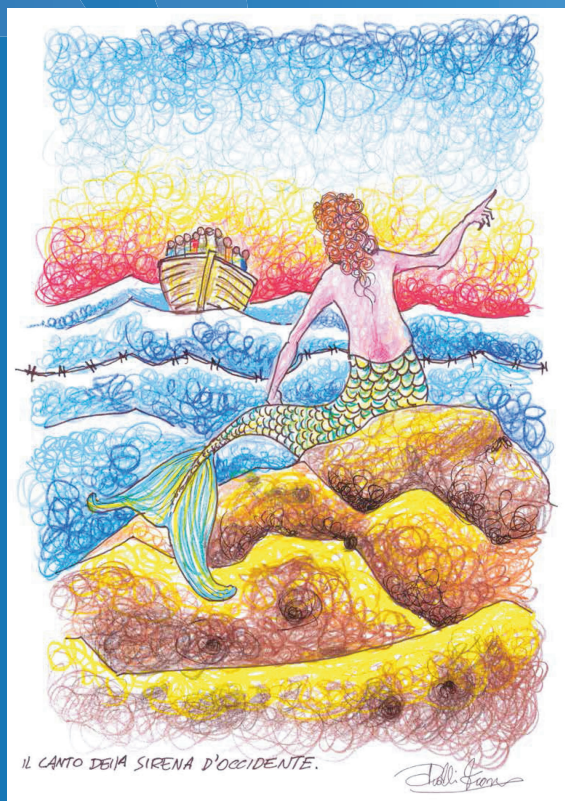


# NEWCOMERS AS AGENTS FOR SOCIAL CHANGE: LEARNING FROM THE ITALIAN EXPERIENCE

A Recourse Book for Social Work and Social Work Education  
in the Field of Migration



Edited by  
Hannah Reich, Roberta T. Di Rosa



Fondazione  
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Assistenti Sociali

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Cover image: *Il canto della sirena d'Occidente*, by Francesco Piobbichi

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## **Images in the text by Francesco Piobbichi**

*Welela*

*Chi salva una vita salva mondo intero*

*3 ottobre*

*Noi e loro*

*È il capitalismo bellezza*

*Tu!*

*Ciao mamma, sono vivo*

*Esodo*

*Senza nome (onorare la memoria)*

A special thanks to Francesco Piobbichi, who has made drawing his weapon against the indifference and violence that permeate the world of migration in the Mediterranean and, unfortunately, sometimes also the reception system. He, a witness to the times in which we live, with a notebook and his pencils, offers us chronicles and memories of stories that the sea has bequeathed to us, so that they are not completely lost in that sea.

Thank you, Francesco, for generously sharing your drawings, and for helping us to honour the lives and memories of so many people we will never know.



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# **Introduction.**

## **Social Work with newcomers: entering into the field**

by Hannah Reich, Roberta T. Di Rosa

For about thirty years, Sicily has assumed the role of a gateway from Africa to Europe, acting as a bridge between cultures, ethnic groups and religions. When we talk about immigration in Sicily, therefore, we are referring to a structural reality, which the island's inhabitants have generally accepted with a sense of hospitality and openness. Sicily is the first Italian region, which had been invested by the arrival of foreign workers from Maghreb countries (Castronovo, 2016). It is in a position signifying historical continuity for newcomers<sup>1</sup>, given that Sicily has always been the crossroads for migrants from Europe, Asia and Mediterranean Africa for the most diverse types of encounters and transits. It is an interesting observation point from which it is possible to look at the social and political implications generated by immigration movements in the understanding of contemporary migration phenomena.

Within these new geopolitical structures, Sicily has assumed a position worthy of attention. For its geographical position it can be considered the land of immigration par excellence, confirming its strategic and central role in the involvement in theatres of wars, invasions, and dominations. Because of its economic, social, and territorial peculiarities, it is actually a difficult and unattractive land from the occupational point of view. In it, therefore, two souls coexist: an immigratory, which exerts a strong attraction of masses from the neighbouring countries, which are in greater difficulty and an emi-

<sup>1</sup> We use in the title this term purposely instead of migrants or refugees, to denote the since the beginning of humankind constant migration of humans over this planet. So, for example: The newcomers of former ages are now part of the inhabitants of Sicily, constituting the host community, and many former inhabitants have migrated further in the North Italy and in Europe. This term is employed by the “new comers” themselves, who migrated from Vietnam to Taiwan (Cheng-Hsiang, 2020) and expresses in our view more profoundly the reality on the ground of steady human migration.

gratory one, which pushes the residents towards the more prosperous regions in the centre and the North of the Italy or towards foreign countries.

However, it is important to keep in mind that in the 21st century the character of migration induced by natural, economic, and political causes (persecution and especially conflicts) has undergone a change, reaching the proportions of a “humanitarian diaspora” (Battistelli, 2021, p. 23). According to UNHCR (2018), 68.5 million refugees fled their homes in 2017. Of these, 25.4 million men, women and children fled violence perpetrated by armed actors in the context of persecution and conflict, such as wars, insurgencies, terrorist attacks, direct or indirect foreign military intervention. Among those who have attempted to cross this sea, UNHCR notes, the 1,720 victims in the first nine months of 2018 show an increased risk of death, in the face of the forced abandonment of rescue operations by NGO ships. Thus, while voyages and landings have decreased, the incidence of deaths in 2018 reached a record of one in every 31 people compared to one in every 49 people in 2017 (Battistelli, 2021, p. 24).

In 2020, Sicily was once again in the centre of international migration flows: the number of migrants landed illegally in Sicily (26,702) more than tripled compared to 2019 (the year 7,123 landed) (Ministry of Labour and Social Policies, 2021). Although these figures represent the majority of landings that occurred throughout the Peninsula, they cannot be representative of the real Italian situation, where, in all of 2020, a total of 34,134 people landed. Most of these migrants, about 38%, come from Tunisia. A country that has never fully recovered after the 2011 revolution against the regime of Ben Ali and that has been struggling a lot due to the Covid-19 pandemic and the resulting economic crisis. This has deprived many people (especially young people) of their work and dignity, which should be guaranteed to them within a democracy. The majority of arrivals occurred in the summer months (July and August). This peak has inevitably led to a chaotic management of the migratory phenomenon by the national government, with the consequent overcrowding of the island’s hotspots. The ones who paid the most, as always, were the migrants who, after having had to face an inhuman journey to reach Europe, spent many days in first reception centres that housed many more people than they could contain. A problem that, if in normal times was “acceptable”, in times of pandemic has become very dangerous, with the real risk of transforming hotspots in real hotbeds of Coronavirus.

Yet not much is known in the wider public about the realities on the grounds Social Workers, who work with the newcomers are facing in Sicily. As of April 2020, the Government’s management of the pandemic has involved the introduction of measures aimed at quarantining people arriv-

ing by sea, including MSNAs, on quarantine ships or in Covid-Hotels, for a length of stay, in some cases, longer than required by health protocols. Further, the situation of promiscuity – overcrowding, lack of physical distance, the presence in the ships of swab positives (Save The Children, 2020) – in addition to the state of health and psycho-physical stress of migrants did not ensure adequate conditions for a proper management and care of the migrants' situations.

This publication is intended to be a Resource Book for Social Workers working in the field of migration. It aims to, on the one hand display facts about the living realities on the ground migrants and Social Workers active in the field are facing in Sicily. This is an important first step to bring the reality of the lived experiences into the public awareness, as they are not adequately represented in the media. It also presents theories on the meaning making processes and on why certain facts are not widely distributed via the media. It thus has purposely chosen the format of a book to present voices deriving from *experience* via articles and images.

On the other hand, it presents methods and approaches, how to act in such a complex situation as a Social Worker and extracts from these experiences and reflections insights, which are significant for the Social Work in the field of migration and thus also for the Social Work educational practice. This has to change and adapt to these new challenges of the 21<sup>st</sup> century<sup>2</sup>. As our security of tomorrow, our global cooperation and social well-being depends on the education of today, we do aim to specifically address the path for transforming our educational practices of International Social Work education.

Thus, in the first part this handbook presents the recent research about the situation in Italy, with special focus on Sicily and offers explanation grounded in current social theories and migration debates. It also takes into considerations the impact of the Covid-19 crisis, which consequences are not yet fully clear (Simone, 2021; Di Rosa, 2021).

In “Scrutinizing the situation on the ground in Sicily”, Giuseppina Tumminelli analyses the difficulties of the conditions of refugees and migrants in Sicily. In recent years, migration has become one of the most debated issues in public opinion because of its political, economic, social, and cultural implications. In addition to defining problems, doubts, epistemological errors, conflicts that the categories used (e.g., regular/irregular, refugee/asylum seekers) trigger.

<sup>2</sup> It thereby builds on works such as Roßkopf, Heilmann (2021); Kleibl, Lutz, Noyoo (2019). We would also particularly like to thank Prof. Dr. Ralf Roßkopf, who has placed the founding stone of the fruitful cooperation between FHWS and UNIPA.

Iasonas Apostolopoulos presents the experience of the *Mediterranea Saving Humans* ONG, discussing about the effects of the closing of the ports together with the past years of criminalization of sea rescue have brought a new reality in the sea. They have changed the behaviour of the passing vessels. Despite continuous calls on the radio urging them to interfere, often they don't even reply to us, they just sail away and leave the migrants at sea. This is exactly the reason the concept of the "European civil fleet" is now more urgent than ever. It is important to emphasize that we are not just rescuing shipwrecked people, civilian and ONG vessels are rescuing fleeing slaves, people that their only way to escape from slavery, torture, and mass rapes in Libya, is through the Mediterranean Sea. His rescue testimony was essential not only to provide information about what is really happening in the Mediterranean Sea but also to strongly oppose the mainstream media and some political parties accuse of being the pull factor of illegal immigration, meaning that the rescue NGOs attract migrants with their presence and encourage them to start their journey from Libya, this is fake news and misleading propaganda.

Giuseppe Platania shows criticalities in the implementation of reception in Sicily through a paradigmatic study case: the CARA of Mineo and the CAS of Rosolini. The lack of basic services, the slowness of the asylum process, and the low rate of recognition have led to migrants' uprising and creation of a welfare from below.

Francesca Rizzuto focuses on the newscoverage of migrants in Italian journalism in the last decade, which has been deeply influenced by the success of the infotainment logic. This is a central issue of the democratic debate because the description of migratory phenomenon, spread by journalists, influences public opinion and policies.

Riccardo Ercole Omodei focusses in his paper on the controversial role of the migrant in the criminal law system, with special regards to the human smuggling and human trafficking. It is analysing the existing and significant gap between the criminological and normative dimensions of the two criminal phenomena, and the related consequences. In doing so, after a brief normative and criminological outline, the paper underlines the inadequacy of the dominating normative point of view.

Ignazia Bartholini describes the phenomenon of proximity violence, which by the author of this article is considered an umbrella concept that takes on different forms of violence against women. In fact, migrant women are often exposed to parental violence that denies their very subjectivity as women and human beings. Migrant women are often victims of proximity violence which is accentuated in contexts with a high rate of vulnerability such as migration.

It becomes even more tangible precisely in their condition of vulnerability associated with their status as asylum seekers/refugees. The lack of alternative ties to parental ones, and of points of reference other than those of one's fellow countrymen, means that the vulnerability of personal situations facilitates the use of violence and make permanent the resulting condition of oppression.

Glauco Iermano introduces us to the experience of the Dedalus Cooperative, which has been engaged since the 1980s in the field of research, planning and management of services of social value, with the aim of intervening in the field of problems related to the social exclusion of vulnerable groups. Here they work together to contribute to the construction of a welcoming community, supportive, inclusive, free and fair, focusing on the protection of rights and equal opportunities, the fight against discrimination, marginality and discomfort. Their work fosters the social, educational, cultural, and working inclusion of many categories of migrants and vulnerable people: unaccompanied foreign minors; young people of the second generations; victims of trafficking, exploitation and violence; homeless people and people addicted to alcohol and substances; asylum seekers and protection.

Giulia Di Carlo addresses the issue of the autonomy of lonely migrant minors, starting from her experience in the field in Palermo and in some Sicilian provinces. The transition to adulthood is for these boys and girls a very critical moment, and it must be faced by supporting them in their paths to autonomy. This means supporting the transition to adulthood through a construction of a solid social capital, encouraging the development of skills useful for entering the labor market but also listening to their needs, dreams and concerns.

We conclude this first part with Roberta T. Di Rosa delivering a framework of Social Work in the field of flight and migration, pointing also to the challenges for and demands on Social Worker.

The second part takes a closer look on practical approaches, referring to experienced based knowledge from practitioners and practitioner researchers to ask the question: How can one act in such deteriorated contexts, with scarce resources and within structures challenging human dignity on a deep and profound level? How can one reconcile contradictions and act if one is facing dilemmas? And mostly what competencies and self-understanding are demanded and thus have to be trained in the International Social Work Education, enabling Social Workers to face these challenges? Just like the "tetralemma process"<sup>3</sup>, this recourse book, doesn't aim at delivering the final

<sup>3</sup> The tetralemma process supports non-linear thinking and process orientation, for further discussion see Sparrer, Varga von Kibéd (2009).

answer to such questions. Rather, it aims at *keeping the question alive*. And in doing this moving forward towards new understandings, framings, and actions. Its intention is thus to strengthen the capacity to resist an automatic pilot mode of action and an implementation of habitual socially legitimized practices, which might deep inside contradict Social Work values.

It strives for fostering an authentic, creative response of Social Workers to the difficulties they are facing in acting within lack of means, resources, marginalization and within harsh structural disbalances. It intends to honour every small step, every moment of dignified eye to eye contact, which allows humanity to emerge as a universal human collective. It does so by listening to those active in the field, on the ground.

We are entering into the field with Ravinder Barn's chapter on: "Empowering Refugees and Migrants: Experiences in Sicily". There she focuses on the theoretical notion of empowerment and explores how this can be utilised in practice to help improve the situation of refugees and migrants in Sicily in general, and unaccompanied minors in particular.

Maria Chiara Monti takes us to the consequences of torture and extreme violence causing severe trauma to displaced persons and refugee migrants who need multidisciplinary and multi-perspective care, in order to restore the human dignity, which was lost in places of violence. The reception system for refugee migrants risks reproducing the same traumas or activating the old ones, causing human suffering.

Francesco Piobbichi presents the experience of Mediterranean Hope, a project of the Federation of Evangelical Churches in Italy launched in 2013 that aims to change the European policy on the border. Now they are operating in Lebanon with the project of humanitarian corridors, in Lampedusa as a migration observatory, in Rosarno with agricultural workers, and in Bosnia finishing assistance to transit workers of the Balkan route.

Salvatore Inguì presents the experience of the Libera Orchestra Popolare, which is part of a series of initiatives aimed at creating concrete opportunities for integration of people who are different from each other. This is making diversity a reason for richness and joy and not exclusion. In LOP are in fact young people who have come out of communities for drug addicts, ex-prisoners, young people with psychiatric diagnoses, others with physical disabilities, immigrants and asylum seekers, Christian Catholics and Protestants, Buddhists, Muslims, atheists, etc. learning to sing and play music. The door is always open for anyone who wants can come in and out.

Ilaria Olimpico outlines in her paper how Social Arts can facilitate a process of awareness. It refers to the experiences of two Asylum Integration Migration Funds (AIMF) projects: PUZZLE, a project about capacity build-



ing in the “Welcoming” System and LIFE, a project about socioeconomic inclusion of Migrants. The article points out the strengths and the challenges of the projects, starting with the underneath challenge of social work: to move from there to the horizon of aid to the vision of a paradigmatic change.

Angelo Miramonti analyses a case study of the use of a Forum Theatre to explore the perspective of Senegalese families towards migration. We use action-research methods to gather data: a theatre workshop was offered to a blended group of on Senegalese young adults and Europeans living in Senegal and the stories shared and the reflections generated by the dialogue with the audience are analysed. This process broad to light how decision-making processes concerning migration issues are taking place within broader power dynamics: within the family of origin, the expectations of families of origin and the new context, where the migrant is living. Shedding light on these interconnections are crucial as they can play a protective or potentially damaging role on migrants’ mental health. Further, the process found out how effectively art and body-based methods can effectively complement other qualitative methods based on observation and elicitation of oral productions.

The second part concludes with “Meaning, Story and beyond the story”, where Hannah Reich points to importance to understand meaning making processes and representation for stories, storytelling, and identity construction. She is embracing a foucaultian understanding of discourse in which the “visible” can’t be reduced to the statements and thus emphasises the need to go out and see, smell, experience the “visibilities” on the ground.

In the final chapter, we take the findings and reflection further into a discussion on Social Work educational practices. Social Work has developed its profession out of a welfare and missionary attitude has to liberate itself further from that perception and has move on in its self-understanding by dwelling further into the deep believe in self-organisation and empowerment, to which it can simply be a midwife. Empowerment of the beneficiary as well as of the social worker, as both have to liberate themselves from impeding structures manifested in the broader social-political and economic context but also within the thoughts, mindsets and behaviour. Both are to be seen as agents to bring about a desired social-economic, political, and ecological sustainable change.

International Social Work has a good chance to depart from old patterns of aid delivery and to embody an understanding of herself as a *transformative actor* (Wintergerst, 2017, p. 236). A profound behavioural change cannot be sufficient accomplished in a “more” in techniques, more in competencies,

but has to move up on the scale into changing beliefs and the construction of identity (Dilts, Hallbom, Smith, 2012). But how could this look like within the Social Work Education? This is the direction the final chapter is heading to.

To conclude this introduction, we would like to acknowledge all participants of the summer school Italy: “Migrations and Societies at the Italian Coast: Human Lives, Reception Systems and Social Work approaches” which took place in September/October 2020 in cooperation of the FHWS and UNIPA funded by the German Academic Exchange Programme (DAAD) for all their insightful contributions and fruitful discussions.

We would also like to thank Francesco Piobbichi for offering his paintings to illuminate the content of this book and metonymically indicating the fact, that experiences resist written or verbal presentations in a magical way and easily slips out of the written exchange and discussions. Yet, at the same time, it’s precisely the representations of the experience, which have the power to write another story about our collective humanity.

In deep appreciation of all of this work done towards a universal human understanding of us within this ecosystem of our planet.

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This publication is a resource book for Social Workers engaging in the field of migration. It aims to, on the one hand, display facts about the living realities on the ground migrants and Social Workers active in the field are facing, circumstances presented by experienced practitioners and researchers of this field. On the other hand, it presents methods and approaches, extracting them from these experiences and reflections insights, relevant for Social Work and consequently, also significant for Social Work educational practice. The new challenges of the 21st century ask Social Work education for a change, adapting curricula towards more experienced based teaching practices, intercultural, participatory learning sites and exchange, and future oriented personal empowerment and resilience training. International Social Work could take on a transformational leading role, as our global security and well-being of tomorrow depends on the educational foundations laid down today.

**Hannah Reich**, PhD, holds a professorship on artistic and movement-oriented methods in Social Work, with focus on interactive theatre, mindfulness and conflict transformation in the Faculty of Applied Social Science at the University of Applied Science Würzburg (FHWS), Würzburg, Germany. Her expertise lies in participatory, experienced based, empowering methods for individuals and for social transformation in intercultural contexts. She is head of the project “International Social Work Acting in Crisis – attitude matters (AttiMa)” which is implemented in a collaboration with Jordan and Lebanon and aims at fostering the resilience of social workers to act in integrity and constructively in crises situations.

**Roberta T. Di Rosa**, PhD, is a social worker and a sociologist. She is Associate professor of Sociology of Migration and International Social Work, coordinator of Master and Degree in Social Work, Department Culture e Società, University of Palermo, Italy, member of Council of Professors in the PHD course in “Estudios Migratorios”, University of Granada and in the PHD course in “Dinamica dei sistemi”, University of Palermo. She is currently engaged in national and international research programs on intercultural competences, international social work, community mediation for migrants’ integration and on protection of vulnerabilities in reception practices.