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Second-generation moroccan women in europe: higher education and labour market positioning

Rachida Dalouh & Encarnación Soriano

University of Almería

Abstract

This paper deals with the career paths followed by women descendants of Moroccan immigrants in Belgium, focusing particularly on a study of the situation of women with higher educational qualifications, and showing how these daughters of immigrants perceive higher education as advantageous to their position in the family, for the development of their careers, and for their socialisation. Its objective is to demonstrate how education and paid employment are being adopted as strategies for upward mobility by women of Moroccan descent in Belgium. A qualitative approach and a comprehensive interpretive overview was used to gather information from in-depth interviews with women descendants of immigrants in Belgium. The results show that the category of "higher educational qualifications" goes hand in hand with considerable social prestige and leads to a number of social privileges. This is a generation with greater social and psychological motivation in the academic sphere, the product of an appreciation of studying and higher education as a route to social advancement and independence from patriarchal models. The personal development of these women can be understood as a force with the potential to raise the class status of the family as a whole.

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1. Introduction

The history of Moroccan migration to Belgium is inextricably linked with the socio-economic context and the migratory policies pursued by the Moroccan and Belgian states. Since the halting of labour migration in the 1970s, the population of Moroccan descent has continued to grow. This growth is primarily due to continued family migration, specifically, matrimonial migration and the birth in Belgium of a large population of children of Moroccan descent. High fertility rates among first-generation Moroccan women generated an immediate consolidation of the social structure of second-generation immigrants in Belgium.

According to Lacomba (2008), different instances or stages are discernible in any migratory process:

- Population movement/displacement: Involves leaving a previously-occupied family space or living space, in a specific context.
- Contact/exchange/process/transformation: Transforms the migration into a discontinuous, living, dynamic process which begins in the migratory phase and only ends on return to the country of origin.
- Generational absorption: A settlement process of two or more generations brings the initial migratory process to an end, and gives rise to subsequent processes which begin in the host society. The second generation, born outside the country of origin, is omitted from the initial migratory process by some authors, while others suggest that family and community ties form part of the second migratory nucleus during the lifespan of the parents who initiated the process.

Rajiva (2013) suggests that, in order to understand the experience of second-generation immigrants in privileged as well as discriminated situations, they should be considered neither mere extensions of the position of their parents, nor so radically different as to be entirely disconnected from them. Second-generation subjects experience the struggles and success of migration through the experiences of their parents, but also in response to their own positioning as subjects born and/or raised, educated and socialised in the host country; they have to negotiate their own ways of belonging. Within these immigration contexts, the daughters of immigrants' successes in school and work often come to be seen as collective successes for the family and the community. Moreover, in some way they come to alleviate the pain and bitterness of the first generation in their struggle for integration.

For Aparicio and Tornos (2006), the second generation is transitional in that its members are not wholly emancipated from the mindset of hastily finding immediate work that drove their newly-arrived parents. They are, after all, a generation of young people who grew up without long-term settlement prospects and were unable to share their situation with a sufficient number of companions from comparable backgrounds.

2. Methodology

In view of the interpretive and comprehensive nature of the study, we applied a qualitative methodology. A qualitative study relies, not on statistically representative samples inferential to the general population, but on different people whose opinions represent those of their reference group and make it possible to identify, analyse and interpret different perspectives. The interpretive approach argues that society is a reality created and maintained through patterns of behaviour and symbolic interactions. For Porta & Silva (2003), this focus is derived from the sociological phenomenology of Schutz, and Berger & Luckman's sociology of knowledge, and considers the interaction between individuals to be the origin of the creation and maintenance of the norms that regulate social living. Not being objective in character, social reality is inseparable from the subjects involved and the expectations, intentions, values systems, etc., of each individual and their specific perception of reality and their own actions. It is important to underline that the qualitative approach is the only approach specific to the social sciences, "since only the human species lives within a reality that is symbolic as well as material" (Beltrán, 2003, p. 41). Its essence lies in the interpretation of language, which enables us to distinguish between the intrinsic, true or essential meaning of things, and the meaning assigned to them by each individual.

The interpretive approach is the theoretical framework that underpins our study, the objective of which was to produce a picture of the phenomenon under investigation as multifaceted as its manifestations in different social situations and contexts. Thus the subjective world of human experience is regarded through the lens of human meanings and intentions. For Tojar (2006, p. 145), "qualitative research is humanist because it deals with the human being from the point of view of the human being. It does not try to conceal or disguise itself behind a cloak of objectivity, of otherness, in order to analyse the phenomena. It seeks out the man and the woman from within their own person. (...) The value of the person and their dignity is also placed above the research itself".

The in-depth interview was the instrument chosen to conduct the investigation, in order to acquire a keen insight into the life experience of women of Moroccan descent. Open questions were used in order to broaden the narrative discourse as far as possible. Interviews were conducted with six Belgian-Moroccan women whose ages ranged between 24 and 42 years. The interviewees lived in the two Belgian cities with the highest concentration of Moroccan community members: Brussels and Antwerp.

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