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To cite this article: Liana M. Daher, Anna Maria Leonora, Eloy Rivas-Sanchez, Giorgia Mavica & Davide Nicolosi (02 Jul 2026): Projects, escapes, returns: the spoken and unspoken words of Moroccan and Tunisian migrant women in Italy, International Review of Sociology, DOI: [10.1080/03906701.2026.2679525](https://doi.org/10.1080/03906701.2026.2679525)

To link to this article: <https://doi.org/10.1080/03906701.2026.2679525>



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Projects, escapes, returns: the spoken and unspoken words of Moroccan and Tunisian migrant women in Italy*

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ABSTRACT

In the academic literature regarding migration studies, the relationship between international mobility and security has received the most attention, while the topic of policies to support assisted voluntary migration (AVRR) for female migrants has remained largely marginal. The lack of adequate consideration of migration policies for women may lead to the continuation of marginalisation patterns. Drawing on 30 interviews with migrant women conducted within the PRIN PNRR We-Propose project, this article investigates their return experiences. Interviews and collected data focus on the tension between migrants' initial aspirations, the challenges they encountered, and the dynamics of returning to their country of origin, paying attention to both explicit narratives and underlying meanings. The analysis addresses key dimensions of the return process, including personal experiences, access to legal measures, interactions with international organisations, and the migrant women's framing of their return experience as either a 'success' or a 'failure'. It also explores the motivations for return, considering both push and pull factors. Therefore, the work contributes to a deeper understanding of the specific challenges migrant women encounter during the return process and offers valuable insights for developing more inclusive and gender-sensitive policies in the context of migration and the AVRR processes.

ARTICLE HISTORY

Received 30 September 2025
Accepted 20 May 2026

KEYWORDS

AVRR; migrant women; life histories; gender-sensitive policies; integration

1. Introduction

Between 2011 and 2023, the European Commission implemented a series of strategic measures aimed at strengthening the European Union's approach to migration, with an increasing emphasis on Assisted Voluntary Return and Reintegration (henceforth AVRR) programmes. However, political institutions have often overlooked the specific

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 Supplemental data for this article can be accessed online at <https://doi.org/10.1080/03906701.2026.2679525>.

*Although this article is the result of a common reflection among the authors, Liana M. Daher wrote sections 1 and 5, and undertook the final comprehensive review of the manuscript; Davide Nicolosi wrote section 2; Anna Maria Leonora wrote section 3; and Giorgia Mavica wrote section 4. Eloy Rivas-Sanchez undertook a mid-term comprehensive review of the manuscript, introducing the necessary and appropriate amendments to enhance its overall quality and coherence.

experiences, needs and constraints of migrant women regarding return processes. In particular, policymakers have failed to account for gender dynamics, thereby contributing to the reinforcement of structural inequalities. This lack of gender-sensitive policies risks undermining the sustainability of reintegration efforts and, ultimately, the long-term effectiveness of return itself (Kuschminder, 2017). Within those institutional accounts, gender remains not only an analytical gap but also a critical axis along which the feasibility, opportunity and sustainability of return must be reconsidered (King & Lulle, 2022).

In the gender perspective that we adopt in this article, the motivations and consequences of return migration differ significantly depending on gender. Gender roles are deeply embedded in the migration process, which in turn shapes the nature of reintegration. For migrant women – particularly those from patriarchal societies – migration often results in a contradictory experience. On the one hand, ‘escape’ from their societies of origin can offer them a degree of autonomy and access to resources that may be limited in their countries of origin (Mahler & Pessar, 2006) while on the other, particularly for those arriving in central European societies, including Italy, migration can also expose them to new forms of oppression and inequality linked to racialisation, precarious legal status, islamophobia, and incorporation into gendered labour segmentation (Calia & Flauto, 2024; Salih, 2000). In that context, return migration for women involves more than just economic factors; it is often shaped by patriarchal expectations, such as the perceived need to fulfil family obligations – which leads migrant women to resume their roles as daughters, wives and mothers in their families and communities (Sadiqi & Ennaji, 2011) – as well as sometimes by the need to ‘escape’ forms of precarity, exclusion and subordination experienced in European societies, as discussed in section 4.1.2 of this paper.¹ Nevertheless, return migration for women may entail a risk of regression – a loss of autonomy, identity and rights negotiated or acquired abroad – particularly when they return to patriarchal contexts that devalue their migratory experience (Borrillo, 2019; Ruiz et al., 2015; Vlasse, 2013). Unlike men, women may face greater scrutiny upon their return regarding their behaviour abroad, clothing, marital status or career choices. Return can thus become a moment of cultural and ideological negotiation, in which women must navigate the tensions between the constraints and opportunities experienced in migratory contexts and the normative expectations of their home societies. In this way, return becomes a negotiation between individual identity and collective social norms (Setrana & Kleist, 2022).

Reintegration can be particularly challenging for women who migrated alone in pursuit of independence, often fleeing deeply repressive environments. For those who attained higher education or developed professional skills in the host country, their personal and career aspirations may not align with the limited opportunities available in their country of origin. In such cases, upon returning, these women may perceive themselves – or be perceived by others – as foreigners within their own community, particularly if they bring back lifestyles and values that have been reshaped by the migratory experience. This category also includes women who, although originally from another country, have grown up from a young age in the host society and feel deeply rooted in it. These women, who have often built stable emotional and family networks – sometimes through marriage to a local – may have little or no desire to return to their country of

origin, as identification with the host country has become central to the construction of their social and cultural belonging (Buján, 2015; Kleinepier et al., 2015).

However, migrant women are not merely passive actors in the reintegration process. Many of them may exhibit remarkable agency in managing their return and redefining their identities, particularly when well-structured programmes and supportive social/informal networks are available to strengthen their empowerment or facilitate a gradual reconnection with their place of origin. Under these conditions, return migration can also become an opportunity to challenge patriarchal norms, develop new forms of livelihood, and emerge as agents of change within their communities. For instance, women who return with savings or with entrepreneurial experience acquired abroad may set up small businesses or actively engage in local activism initiatives (Sadiqi & Ennaji, 2011).

This article focuses on the experiences of Tunisian and Moroccan women who have migrated to Italy and reflected on the possibility of returning to their countries of origin – whether by considering it, evaluating it, or ultimately rejecting it. The analysis takes into account their empowerment trajectories, their awareness, or lack thereof, of AVRR programmes, and the type of support received from social and informal networks – factors that may significantly influence their decisions regarding return.

This study is part of the broader research project WE PROPOSE – Processes, Policies, and Networks in Support of Women’s Returnees to Tunisia and Morocco. It focuses on how Moroccan and Tunisian women navigate the tension between the desire to maintain a connection with their country of origin and the need to distance themselves from its socio-economic constraints and patriarchal structures. In the project, AVRR has emerged as a key policy tool to reconcile migration governance with humanitarian imperatives. At the European level, AVRR is governed by Directive 2008/115/EC, which prioritises voluntary over forced return and promotes the adoption of programmes that ensure assistance, reintegration, and the protection of migrants’ fundamental rights (Schiocchet & Nölle-Karimi, 2022). Even though Italy transposed this directive into a concrete normative framework, the practical implementation of AVRR has yielded modest results.²

The WE PROPOSE project departs from dominant approaches that frame return migration exclusively as a technocratic instrument or geopolitical tool of border governance and mobility control. Instead, it treats return as a socially and politically situated process – one that is marked by contested meanings and uneven power relations, particularly in the lives of women. Rather than reducing return to the closure of a migratory cycle, we approach it as a transformative and often conflictual moment that reshapes subjectivities, destabilises established gender norms, and reconfigures relations of autonomy and dependence across transnational social fields. In our view, this happens because return migration frequently unsettles entrenched hierarchies and exposes the contradictions of both the host and home contexts. Using this framing and drawing on 30 semi-structured interviews with migrant women from Tunisia and Morocco residing in Sicily and other Italian regions – the empirical basis of this paper – the article examines the frictions and discrepancies between personal aspirations, structural constraints, and the lived post-return realities of migrant women. In doing so, the article foregrounds women’s voices and experiences that question the prevailing narratives of return and shed light on the complex entanglements of return migration with gender, power and mobility regimes.

The interviewees are women who did not migrate by choice, but out of necessity. Their migration to Italy was often the result of social, economic or family pressures that compelled them to leave their original environment, to sever ties with their roots in order to pursue life goals and personal fulfilment that would otherwise remain unattainable. In this sense, their departure may represent an act of rupture with a context perceived as oppressive – where staying would mean renouncing their own identity. Such a rupture could potentially be avoided if policies were in place to inspire in these women a genuine desire to return to their native context. In their life stories the metaphor of the door and the bridge, developed by Simmel (1994/1909), provides an effective interpretive framework for understanding how women may experience their migratory journeys. The door symbolises the transition from a limiting context to a new one, fraught with uncertainties but also rich in possibilities, while the bridge represents the attempt to maintain a connection – to build links between the point of departure and the destination. This dual movement – separation and connection – may be deeply reflected in the narratives of migrant women, who do not experience migration as a definitive rupture, but rather as a dynamic process of personal and social transformation.

This study seeks to contribute to a shift in perspective, moving from viewing return as a mere act of repatriation to recognising it as a multifaceted process that must be tailored to the specific needs, aspirations and lived experiences of migrant women. Moreover, it aims to promote the development and implementation of gender-sensitive policies or community-based interventions, and support measures that not only facilitate the logistical aspects of return but also address the emotional, political and sociocultural dimensions of reintegration.

2. Gender, mobility and reintegration: conceptual considerations and questions to be explored

The concept of ‘return migration’ is defined as a multidimensional sociological phenomenon, referring to the return of individuals to their country of origin after a period of residence abroad. The motivations underlying this process are closely linked to the migrants’ future life plans: these may include the aspiration to build a professionally fulfilling career, the desire to improve their financial situation by accessing what are perceived as more advantageous employment opportunities, as well as the intention to re-establish or strengthen emotional ties with family members who remained in the country of origin (Bhatt et al., 2025; Chávez et al., 2016). In this regard, the gender dimension functions as an analytical lens that reveals how return migration is not a simple return to one’s roots but rather a negotiated process in which models acquired abroad interact with the established norms of the place of origin (Rahman & Salisu, 2023).

The sociological literature on the subject highlights how migrant men and women experience return migration in profoundly different ways, shaped by socio-economic conditions and gender dynamics in both the countries of origin and destination (Christou & Kofman, 2022; Haddad & Caron, 2023; Setrana & Kleist, 2022; Torosyan et al., 2016). In general, male migrants tend to perceive return migration in a positive light, as they often manage to secure employment in well-paying sectors while abroad, which enables them to accumulate financial resources that can be reinvested in their place of origin, thereby facilitating an active reintegration into their home society

(Patnaik et al., 2015). Conversely, migrant women often express greater reluctance toward returning, as their experience is frequently shaped by conditions of subordination and persistent exclusion from decision-making processes, particularly within the family and economic spheres. Although many of them make substantial contributions to family well-being through employment in destination countries, these responsibilities do not necessarily translate into social recognition or increased autonomy (Miah et al., 2025).

In the host countries, it is indeed common for migrant women to enter the labour market through marginal and precarious sectors, such as domestic and care work, which rarely confer social status or professional prestige. In these contexts, the autonomy that women manage to attain – such as the ability to make independent decisions or contribute economically – often proves to be fragile, as it is not supported by genuine social recognition. Upon returning to their country of origin, this fragility translates into a rapid reassignment to subordinate and traditional roles, with the result that the entire migratory experience is belittled or ignored, as though it had brought about no real transformation in the woman's subjectivity or social status (Ruiz et al., 2015). In some cases, however, migration enables women to achieve a certain degree of economic stability, acquire citizenship, or accumulate assets, thereby making the prospect of return less desirable due to the potential loss of these gains. This explains why many migrant women, despite maintaining strong emotional and symbolic bonds with their families in their country of origin, prefer to settle permanently in host countries, where the social and economic conditions they attain allow them to preserve a personal space for self-determination (Paparusso & Ambrosetti, 2017).

Geographical distance does not dissolve family ties but rather reorganises them, giving rise to a new form of 'long-distance intimacy' in which the migrant woman remains a significant point of reference for her family of origin, despite her physical absence. Within this transnational context, family roles and hierarchies are redefined. The woman who migrates often assumes a role of support and sustenance for her family back home, though this role remains inherently ambiguous: on the one hand, her economic contribution enhances her influence and consolidates her importance within the family; on the other, the distance and the patriarchal norms of the society of origin limit the social recognition of this essential role. As a result, a persistent tension emerges between the expectations of subordination that continue to emanate from the family environment and the autonomy she has achieved (Saar, 2017): many women hope to come back as independent and transformed individuals, yet they fear being repositioned within traditional roles as caretakers of the family and social conventions. When return is unsuccessful – burdened by debt or unmet expectations – it may result in a loss of recognition and self-esteem (Nawaz & Tonny, 2025).

This tension is further exacerbated by the potential sociocultural, normative, or urban transformation of the country of origin during the period of absence, which may create a divide between the idealised image of the past and the present reality, hindering the migrant's reintegration and generating feelings of estrangement. Neither the migrant subject nor the context of origin remains unchanged: while women acquire autonomy and skills abroad – experiencing a renegotiation of their social roles, developing competencies, economic independence and decision-making freedom – the societies of origin frequently tend to become more rigid, reinforcing traditional norms and values as a defensive response to global social and cultural changes (Caselli, 2021). Under such

circumstances, return may not represent a homecoming to a familiar environment, but rather a confrontation with a profoundly transformed context that is reluctant to accept the subjective transformations developed over time. In many cases, the passage of time has not resulted in social progress but has instead produced a subtle reconfiguration of control, expressed through a renewed emphasis on family obligations, heightened social surveillance over women's behaviour, and a reduction in spaces for personal autonomy and self-determination (Kleinepier et al., 2015; Pauli, 2021). This may lead many women to express a desire to leave again, not necessarily for economic reasons, but rather to reaffirm the sense of freedom and autonomy they experienced during their time abroad (Buján, 2015).

In this regard, women are more likely to settle permanently in host countries, particularly when they have resided there since childhood and have established stable relationships with native-born partners. This dynamic plays a decisive role in shaping the woman's sense of belonging and permanence in the host country. The native partner represents rootedness and continuity in the host society, and their relationship reinforces the woman's investment in local life, from everyday practices to long-term aspirations. As a result, return migration becomes not just less feasible in logistical terms, but less desirable on a personal and emotional level, as it would mean abandoning a life that has become deeply embedded in the social fabric of the receiving country (Kleinepier et al., 2015).

However, the skills and resources acquired during migration can offer the foundations for a new phase of life. When women receive support that strengthens their sense of identity, acknowledges the journey they have undertaken, and reinforces their self-confidence, these experiences become a basis for renewed self-understanding and for their potential role as agents of social and cultural change (Donato et al., 2025).

From this perspective, empowerment can be conceived as a functional and dynamic process that materialises only when the skills, resources and autonomies acquired abroad are socially acknowledged and effectively integrated into local structures of opportunity upon return (Aman et al., 2022). In this sense, migration becomes genuinely emancipatory when women are able to operationalise their acquired capabilities – translating personal growth into social participation, economic initiative, and decision-making power – thereby affirming and extending the subjective transformations shaped through the migratory experience (Patnaik et al., 2015).

Empowerment should not be conceived as an isolated event, but rather as a dynamic process of subjectivation and identity renegotiation, through which women construct an enterprising self or new forms of agency by engaging in self-directed learning, situated learning experiences, peer collaboration, the creation of social networks, and the valorisation of local knowledge (Elo et al., 2024). This process is driven by a constructive tension between the need for economic autonomy, family responsibilities, and the desire for self-fulfilment. Ultimately, this translates into the acquisition of new forms of agency, managerial skills, forms of reclaiming one's time and personal history, the development of micro-economies capable of increasing household income and self-confidence, and, above all, a break with patriarchal stereotypes that traditionally confine women to the exclusive roles of mothers and homemakers (Ammassari, 2009; Chen & Barcus, 2024; Veronese et al., 2019).

Focusing on Moroccan and Tunisian women is particularly relevant, as they represent a strategic focal point within the field of return migration studies, embodying in an

emblematic way the complexity of the return experience – an experience that cannot be regarded as neutral, but rather as profoundly shaped by gender dynamics, structural inequalities, and the potential for social transformation. In these two specific contexts, despite having shown signs of regulatory and institutional openness in recent years, female participation in the labour market remains low, and women continue to be marginalised in political, administrative and economic decision-making spheres (Borrillo, 2019).

Although Tunisia and Morocco display distinct socio-political characteristics – with different legal systems, welfare structures, and levels of institutional gender responsiveness – they both maintain long-standing migratory ties with Italy, shaped by historical patterns of mobility, bilateral agreements and postcolonial relationships. These enduring connections make the return of women from Italy to these two countries a particularly meaningful case study through which to examine how personal agency, structural limitations, and policy frameworks interact. Analysing their experiences allows for a deeper understanding of how return is not only negotiated at the individual level but also embedded in transnational dynamics that influence the possibility of reintegration and recognition (Collyer, 2016).

Hence, exploring the specific trajectories of Moroccan and Tunisian women towards and from Italy is essential to understanding how return decisions – whether to go back or to engage with AVRR programmes – emerge from complex subjective evaluations, shaped by the success or failure of the migration project, personal empowerment, and the extent to which such experiences can be translated into economic participation, social engagement, and access to rights. This analysis makes it possible to assess the extent to which the migratory experience has served as an opportunity for emancipation, and whether such emancipation is effectively transferable and acknowledged within the context of reintegration.

In this regard, the analysis of the data collected through interviews with Moroccan and Tunisian women residing in Italy will focus on addressing the following research questions: what motivations and expectations led Tunisian and Moroccan women to migrate to Italy, and how have these drivers shaped their migratory trajectories abroad? How have these women experienced daily life in Italy in terms of employment, access to rights, and perceptions of autonomy or exclusion? Does the empowerment they have acquired abroad foster a desire or willingness to return to their countries of origin? What are their expectations regarding a potential return to their homeland? In this regard, have AVRR programmes provided meaningful opportunities for women to express and pursue this desire? Do social and informal networks play a supportive role in the processes of social integration and in strengthening the empowerment of migrant women? Finally, can the analysis of migrant women's trajectories help us understand how institutional structures and social/informal networks may assist them in envisioning a sustainable return? These questions reflect the dual aims of this study: on the one hand, to provide an in-depth analysis of return trajectories understood as subjective and situated processes, and on the other hand, to contribute to the development of more inclusive intervention tools that are sensitive to gender-specific dynamics. Return cannot be conceived as a mere reversal of the migratory movement, but rather as a critical phase of redefinition in relation to places, identities and affective networks. Only when the context of origin is capable of valuing the experiences and transformations undergone elsewhere can truly

sustainable reintegration pathways be achieved. From this perspective, the present study aims to investigate the ways in which return is experienced, supported, or hindered, with the goal of identifying possible pathways towards sustainable reintegration and full social recognition (Elo et al., 2025). The ultimate goal is to understand the extent to which return policies, institutional frameworks, and social/informal networks are genuinely capable of supporting authentically transformative trajectories and of recognising female subjectivities as legitimate bearers of new imaginaries and alternative futures. This requires shifting from approaches that act on behalf of women to those that act alongside them – building relationships of trust, listening and shared responsibility. In particular, reintegration becomes meaningful only when it is grounded in collaboration and genuine proximity, when institutions and experts in migration issues engage with women's lived experiences not as distant observers but as allies in their own processes of redefinition. Working with women rather than for them allows their perspectives, desires and strategies of resilience to shape the very fabric of return pathways. Only through such an empathetic and participatory stance can return become a space of mutual learning and transformation, where belonging and autonomy are reimagined collectively rather than imposed from above (Abu-Lughod, 2015).

3. The fieldwork: implementation, tools and criticalities

The fieldwork implemented a qualitative research design (Rubin & Rubin, 2012; Silverman, 2017) through 30 semi-structured interviews conducted with Moroccan and Tunisian women residing in Italy aged 19–66 (Table 2) aimed at capturing meanings, experiences and social practices (Rubin & Rubin, 2012) related to return migration. The research was conducted between March 2024 and June 2025 and the interview protocol was designed to critically engage with the effectiveness and sustainability of AVRR measures (originally designed as gender-neutral) through the narratives of potential beneficiaries. Semi-structured interviews constituted the core data collection tool specifically designed to explore women's narratives, with particular attention to intersections between migration histories, gendered labour experiences, family responsibilities, and aspirations for economic autonomy.

Owing to the particular nature of the social units involved (migrant women), the fieldwork proved to be highly innovative and challenging, and required scientific and deontological rigour (Campbell et al., 2024; Silverman, 2017). Alongside the design of the interview protocol, informed consent forms were prepared for the cataloguing, archiving, and use of the research data, which were duly anonymised. (Decataldo & Ruspini, 2014, p. 38). In this context, the alignment between the role of researcher and that of fieldworker allowed for enhanced sensitivity and flexibility in conducting interviews with vulnerable participants, particularly migrant women residing in Italy (Hyndman et al., 2010). Due to the elusive nature of the participants, the recruiting strategy for the fieldwork consisted of a first phase through which a list of potential contacts was provided by institutional stakeholders of the AVRR ecosystem. After this, the second stage of creating the final list of interviewees involved the intergovernmental organisations (i.e. IOM) and local associations of the diaspora operating in the Italian regions involved in the project.

Question wording and sequencing were carefully considered to align the protocol with the cultural distance between the research field and the subjects involved (Love et al., 2022; Marschan-Piekkari & Reis, 2004; Salmi, 2011). Given the delicate nature of the topic and the sensitivity of the social units, the interview protocol was refined after the very first interviews (Bichi, 2002) because it revealed some critical issues of a semantic nature (due to the need to translate the interview transcripts into English and French and in some cases Arabic) and cultural nature (Gobo, 2015).

The organisation of the sections and questions of the interview (Table 1) within the semi-structured protocol was designed to record the migration experience and expectations of return that might otherwise remain implicit or unarticulated in the interviewee's spontaneous narrative. However, despite the expertise of the researcher/

Table 1. Structure of the interview protocol.

Question	Analytical dimension
What factors influenced your decision to migrate (e.g. employment opportunities, family considerations, education, or other gender-specific reasons)?	Migration Experience → Before migration → General condition and expectations
Please describe your migration journey, including who travelled with you, who remained behind, and the role played by social networks or intermediaries (e.g. parents, siblings, partner/children, friends, or travelling alone)	Migration Experience → Before migration → General condition and expectations
What were the main factors that influenced your decision to return, and who – if anyone – played a role in that decision?	Migration Experience → Before migration → General condition and expectations
Thinking back to your time in Italy, could you describe your experiences, with particular attention to both professional and personal aspects?	Migration Experience → During migration → Life in Italy: relational and work experiences
In what ways have your experiences as a female migrant shaped your aspirations and goals?	Migration Experience → During migration → Life in Italy: relational and work experiences
Please describe your professional experiences in the host country and after your return	Education and Professional Development and empowerment
How did your employment and/or career trajectory change over time?	Education and Professional Development and empowerment
Which skills do you consider essential for women's entrepreneurship?	Education and Professional Development and empowerment
How has your return, as a woman, affected cultural and social dynamics in your community? Have you noticed any changes in norms or attitudes?	Education and Professional Development and empowerment
Could you describe the role your family played in your decision to return?	Daily relationships and Networking
Could you describe the role your friends and/or peer groups played in your decision to return?	Daily relationships and Networking
What challenges did you face, as a woman, in reintegrating into family life and social networks after returning?	Daily relationships and Networking
Could you share your experiences of cultural readjustment after returning?	Daily relationships and Networking
Are you in contact with women who are still in Europe and may be considering return? Who are they, and how do you keep in touch?	Daily relationships and Networking
Were there any political or economic events that influenced your decision to return?	After migration → Macro Influences and Policy Perspectives
From your perspective, what gender-specific policy changes would better support women's return migration?	After migration → Macro Influences and Policy Perspectives
Looking back, what insights or advice would you offer to other women considering a similar journey?	After migration → Macro Influences and Policy Perspectives
In what ways has migration changed you (e.g. obstacles encountered and achievements)?	After migration → Macro Influences and Policy Perspectives
What are your hopes for the future?	After migration → Macro Influences and Policy Perspectives

fieldworker, the first interview revealed the critical challenges associated with recruiting interview participants (Lee, 1993). Linguistic difficulties as well as cultural and religious differences were also taken into consideration by the research team. The research team was composed of mature women (aged 44–53), and most of the interviews (20/30) were conducted with the support of a female Moroccan cultural mediator who spoke both Arabic and French (Welch & Piekkari, 2006). The contribution of the cultural mediator was pivotal in ensuring both linguistic and cultural comprehension and the interview notes were included in the final summary sheet for each interview (Corao, 2005; Denzin, 2010; Love et al., 2022).

Moreover, the first step of the interview revealed some limitations of the trust in the relationship between the researcher and the interviewees, mainly due to cultural distance and uncertain legal status with regard to migrant conditions. Due to this, some follow-up questions were reworded to avoid lemmas such as *migration*, *migrant*, *foreigner* or even *political* which were replaced with *travel*, *departure*, ‘from another Mediterranean country’ and ‘what you know about your country’. More importantly, from the first interview, more space and attention were given to issues regarding registered age, level of schooling, marital status (single or married) and migratory status (alone, with others/relatives/spouse), and territorial and social context of origin (urban or rural areas). The interviewees carefully avoided two sensitive topics: relationships with relatives (especially males) before and after migration, and politically sensitive issues in their country of origin. Moreover, the AVRR represented a controversial topic to which the

Table 2. Participants’ descriptive statistics.

N.	Age	Nationality	Social status ^a	Education
1	33	Morocco	With relatives	Middle
2	19	Tunisia	Married	Middle
3	23	Tunisia	Married	Low
4	38	Tunisia	Married	Low
5	39	Tunisia	Married	Low
6	24	Morocco	Alone	High
7	32	Tunisia	Married	High
8	20	Tunisia	Alone	Middle
9	21	Tunisia	Alone	Middle
10	66	Morocco	Married	Low
11	56	Morocco	Married	High
12	49	Morocco	Married	Low
13	30	Tunisia	Married	High
14	48	Tunisia	Married	Middle
15	28	Morocco	Married	Middle
16	58	Tunisia	With relatives	Middle
17	32	Tunisia	Alone	High
18	25	Morocco	With relatives	Middle
19	48	Tunisia	Married	Middle
20	26	Tunisia	Alone	High
21	30	Tunisia	Married	Low
22	27	Tunisia	Married	Low
23	24	Morocco	With relatives	Middle
24	32	Morocco	With relatives	Middle
25	18	Tunisia	Alone	High
26	24	Tunisia	Alone	High
27	46	Tunisia	With relatives	High
28	31	Morocco	Married	Middle
29	32	Tunisia	Married	Middle
30	27	Morocco	With relatives	Middle

Note: ^aSocial status at the time of migration, and whether the woman migrated with her husband, alone, or with relatives.

interviewees responded evasively. To overcome these obstacles in the interview protocol, detailed field notes were taken, including additional information provided off record at the end of the interview. Most of these situations were observed among women who had migrated together with their family (husband and children) and had been residing in Italy for approximately one year. The analytical framework was designed to systematically organise key information and relevant details essential for tracing women's involvement in AVRР programmes, as well as for analysing their networking capacities both in Italy and in the two MENA countries.

4. Spoken and unspoken voices in women's return journeys

4.1. Data analysis

The analysis aims primarily to shed light on the deep interconnections between the motivations for migration, the living conditions in the host country, the individual trajectories, the empowerment process, and the formal and social/informal support practices that shape both the possibilities and representations of return migration.

This study goes beyond the mere presentation of empirical findings, positioning itself as an interpretive tool designed to analyse data across these dimensions, with the goal of reconstructing women's migratory trajectories in their dynamic complexity.

It is precisely through the cross-reading of these dimensions that one can grasp the specificity of the experiences of Tunisian and Moroccan women, highlighting how structural constraints, individual resources, and social and affective networks mutually influence each other over time. This is approached from a perspective that seeks to understand women's choices, their possibilities for autonomy, and the representations tied to the idea of return.

This approach frames return not as a conclusive event, but as a phase of identity and social renegotiation. Therefore, the analysis functions not only as a framework for interpreting individual trajectories, but also as a means for defining more inclusive practices that are sensitive to the transformations that emerge throughout the migratory experience. It seeks to highlight the extent to which these transformations impact on the question of whether return is still perceived as a desirable option.

4.1.1. Drivers of migration

The motivations that led Tunisian and Moroccan women to migrate appear layered and interconnected, unfolding across multiple dimensions – economic, social, cultural and biographical. In many cases, the decision to leave takes shape in response to the perception of an uncertain future and a lack of tangible prospects in the country of origin, where the absence of stable employment opportunities is accompanied by experiences of gender-based marginalisation and discrimination. As one Tunisian woman states: *I left because finding a job was difficult* (#9 Tunisian woman, 21 alone, middle education), while others add: *Even if you work, they don't pay you* (#8 Tunisian woman, 20, alone, middle education). These experiences highlight the fact that a significant number of migrant women are compelled to leave their home countries due to a labour market marked by widespread precarity, a lack of stable opportunities, and limited possibilities for acquiring and internalising new skills and knowledge.

In addition to economic motivations, there is a strong emergence of drivers linked to the pursuit of autonomy and the desire to escape deeply oppressive family, social and cultural contexts. One Moroccan woman, for example, describes migration as a break from a symbolic and moral order that restricts female freedom: *I became pregnant outside marriage ... I had to flee to Tunisia* (#6, Moroccan woman, 24, alone, middle education). This testimony highlights how migration can serve as a space for subjective transformation, allowing women to explore forms of autonomy that would otherwise be inaccessible in their countries of origin. This dynamic is evident even among women with higher levels of education. For instance, a Tunisian woman with a degree in business administration perceives migration as the only way to make use of her qualifications: *in Tunisia, the future is bleak. Even if I study and obtain a diploma, I cannot do anything because there are no job opportunities there* (#25, Tunisian woman, 18, alone, high education).

The motivations underlying migration thus emerge as the result of an intersection between macro-level structural factors and micro-level biographical determinants. In many cases, migration represents a strategy of resistance – an obligatory yet active choice – through which women seek to escape constraints that hinder their ability to envision a dignified future. Gender plays a particularly significant role in shaping both the conditions of departure and the expectations associated with the migratory experience, guiding female subjectivities toward pathways aimed at achieving autonomy, security and recognition – objectives often unattainable in their countries of origin. As one Tunisian woman put it: *I left to work, but also to feel free ... at home, I didn't even have the right to go out alone.* (#20 Tunisian woman, 26, alone, high education).

Based on these initial empirical findings, the analytical value of identifying the diverse trajectories undertaken by migrant women throughout their migratory experience becomes evident. Although these pathways are not rigidly predetermined, they provide an interpretative framework for understanding how female subjectivities engage with the opportunities and constraints presented by the migratory context. Mapping such trajectories serves as a critical analytical tool to grasp how female migration experiences unfold through dynamics of resistance, adaptation, and the potential for social reconfiguration. It sheds light on the intermediate space where new identity configurations emerge, previous equilibriums are disrupted, and biographical paths are reassembled through processes of adjustment, discontinuity and reinterpretation.

4.1.2. Migrant women's trajectories: between constraints, aspirations, and identity reconfiguration

The migration of the interviewed women emerges from an interweaving of material necessities, family constraints, emotional tensions, and desires for emancipation. The departures described by these women do not appear as linear or fully autonomous choices, but rather as responses to contexts marked by economic precariousness, patriarchal control, and a lack of prospects. The need to find work, to continue their studies, or simply to live in a less oppressive society emerges as a deep and recurring motivation, though almost always intertwined with experiences of pain, rupture and emotional separation. Italy appears more as an opportunity seized at the right moment than as a desired destination, and arrival is often a solitary experience characterised by disorientation and a sense of displacement. Identity thus begins to be questioned, suspended between what one was and what one might become. Italy is rarely a planned choice,

but rather the result of contingent conditions, such as the presence of relatives, a sudden opportunity to leave, or the need to escape difficult situations. Arrival is frequently marked by loneliness, disorientation and challenges in adaptation, and from the very beginning, women find themselves having to reconsider their role and identity, without clear points of reference.

Two distinct yet equally precarious trajectories emerge in the migratory experience of women in Italy. On one hand, there are those who arrive with their families, often accompanied by their husbands, and find themselves embedded in a dynamic of subordination that is evident both in domestic life and in the labour sphere; on the other hand, there are women who migrate alone, driven by a personal project of autonomy, and who are at times able to transform work into an opportunity for growth and recognition.

In the first case, migration is framed as a family-driven decision, in which the woman's role is subordinate to that of her husband, and her primary concern is the collective well-being of the household. This dynamic compels her to accept any form of employment, without imposing conditions or asserting professional aspirations. Work is perceived as an economic duty and a form of sacrifice, within a logic where necessity overrides personal choice. It is within this context that the statement 'what matters is working ...' (#7 Tunisian woman, 32, married, high education) is situated, spoken by a woman who has alternated between factory work, retail, and domestic labour. The absence of individual planning reflects a condition in which the urgent need for an income suppresses any space for personal ambition, reinforcing marginalisation in the most invisible and undervalued segments of the labour market.

By contrast, some migrant women are able – at least partially – to escape this logic. These are women who undertook migration alone, without immediate family ties, and who, over time, have created opportunities for professional advancement. Although they initially entered the same sectors of domestic or care work, they have managed – through favourable circumstances or individual resources – to transform these experiences into opportunities for learning and growth. This is illustrated by the testimony of a woman who states: *I'm working as a reception operator in a centre. I never imagined it, but I have acquired this skill* (#8 Moroccan woman, 20, alone, middle education). In such cases, migration does not amount to a series of sacrifices but becomes a transformative journey in which identity is restructured through new forms of social and professional participation.

In both trajectories, what unites the experiences of migrant women is the absence of a genuine prospect of return. Regardless of the initial intent with which migration was undertaken, over time it loses its temporary character and assumes the contours of a stable – often definitive – condition. Return to the country of origin is no longer considered, as women – albeit in different ways – ultimately become rooted in the lives they build elsewhere: for women who migrate within the framework of a family project, returning is not ruled out due to a lack of inclination, but rather because of a strong sense of responsibility toward the family. The primary objective is to ensure the survival and economic stability of the household; in this context, the type of work performed is irrelevant as long as it generates income. There is no room for the development of a personal project, as work serves the purpose of subsistence rather than the affirmation of individual identity; conversely, for women who chose to migrate independently – often leaving behind family constraints or oppressive situations – migration carries a distinctly

different meaning. Return is not a viable option, as remaining abroad represents the only true opportunity for emancipation. While integration into the Italian labour market may be arduous, it is nonetheless perceived as the primary channel through which to achieve not only economic independence but also personal growth. In this context, even precarious or low-skilled jobs are often experienced not merely as survival strategies, but as initial steps in a broader trajectory of self-affirmation and professional advancement aimed at building an autonomous life.

Alongside the two previously described trajectories, a third, more subtle yet equally significant path emerges – one shaped by the growing sense of estrangement that many migrant women develop towards their country of origin after spending years abroad. In this case, returning is not avoided merely for economic or family reasons, but because it becomes an experience of profound disorientation, where the distance is no longer just geographical, but existential and symbolic. This trajectory unfolds within a dual process of transformation. On one hand, the migrant woman undergoes significant change, acquiring skills, economic independence, decision-making autonomy, and new modes of relating to herself and the world. On the other hand, the country she left behind is also transformed – socially, culturally, legally, or urbanistically – often in directions that contrast with the personal evolution experienced by the woman abroad. In this context, return cannot be conceived as a mere restoration of the pre-migration condition. Rather, it becomes a process fraught with internal tensions, challenges of reintegration, and feelings of dislocation. The gap between an idealised image of the past and the present reality widens, rendering the reinsertion process increasingly difficult: *when I go back there, even the people are no longer the way they used to be – everything has moved on. Yet, I still imagine my country as I left it. So, when I return, I don't feel Tunisian; I don't feel it because the people there don't make me feel Tunisian. When I'm there, I'm neither Tunisian nor anyone at all* (#16 Tunisian woman, 58, with relatives, middle education).

Unlike the case of women who develop a growing sense of estrangement from their country of origin, another trajectory can be observed in which returning is not only ruled out, but emotionally, socially, and existentially inconceivable. This pertains to women who, having arrived at a young age or become integrated through emotional relationships with native partners, have established deep and multidimensional roots in Italy. In these specific cases, the possibility of returning is excluded not merely for logistical or family reasons, but because migration has led to a stable redefinition of identity, emotional ties and sense of belonging. The presence of a native partner functions as both a symbolic and social mediator of integration, facilitating access to local networks and reinforcing a sense of continuity with the host context. At the same time, the renegotiation of family roles and the autonomy gained through the migratory experience often prove difficult to reconcile with the normative expectations of the country of origin, which comes to appear increasingly distant in symbolic and value-based terms. Along this trajectory, the country of origin is no longer recognised as 'home,' but rather as an 'other' space, incapable of accommodating the subjective transformations developed abroad. As one interviewee, a Moroccan woman, states: *I basically grew up in Italy; I attended university here. The main reason I stayed in Italy was out of habit and because I live well here. Then, of course, I met my boyfriend, who later became my husband, and that's when I decided I would stay in Italy* (#24 Moroccan woman, 32, with relatives, high education).

These trajectories allow for a nuanced interpretation of women's migration, revealing a cross-cutting feature that appears to emerge: the widespread absence of a concrete desire to return to the country of origin. However, this tendency is not manifested in a homogeneous or explicit way. Several women do not express a categorical refusal to return; rather, they describe return as a temporary possibility – primarily to maintain affective ties with family members – rather than as a sustainable long-term project. As one Moroccan woman remarked: *I thought about going back to my country, but not forever. Just to greet my family and come back here ...* (#14 Moroccan woman, 48, married, middle education). Others, after many years residing in Italy, report having redefined their sense of belonging, describing their country of origin as distant and unfamiliar: *when I go to Morocco, if I stay a month, by the first week I already want to return to Italy because I already feel that Sicily is my homeland* (#13 Moroccan woman, 30, married, high education).

This limited interest in returning would seem to reflect more than personal preference. It appears to point to an incomplete and structurally unsupported form of empowerment – one in which women, despite having achieved a degree of economic independence and self-determination during their stay in Italy, would not be able to translate these gains into feasible life projects in their countries of origin. Several factors could contribute to this: the persistence of rigid gender norms that continue to restrict women's autonomy; limited access to employment or entrepreneurial opportunities; the lack of institutional programmes specifically tailored to women's reintegration; and the absence of social recognition for the skills and experiences they might have acquired abroad. This limitation may be further compounded by a widespread lack of access to information about institutional return mechanisms, such as AVRR programmes. The absence of targeted communication and outreach may thus contribute to the perception that return is neither a viable nor a meaningful option.

Therefore, the low propensity to return should not be interpreted as a passive outcome but as a result of a complex set of subjective, structural and institutional factors. It reflects the mismatch between the lived realities of migrant women and the abstract logic of return policies, which often fail to address the gendered dimensions of reintegration. Without mechanisms that actively support and recognise women's aspirations, skills and forms of autonomy, return will continue to be perceived not as an opportunity, but as a loss. Another critical factor may lie in the discontinuity and fragmentation of social and informal support networks which, although playing a vital role in migratory trajectories, often fail to provide consistent or clear guidance, thereby reinforcing uncertainty and a sense of disconnection from structured return opportunities.

A deeper analysis of these aspects would therefore enable a better understanding of the reasons why return is rarely considered, while also offering insight into how return policies could be made more effective, equitable, and genuinely supportive of migrant women's self-determination.

4.1.3. Women's empowerment and support mechanisms for return: between formal frameworks and social/informal networks

Empowerment emerges as a central element in women's migratory trajectories – not as an automatic outcome of migration, but as a long, situated and often contradictory process. The statements of the interviewees highlight this process as a gradual strengthening

of psychological, educational and professional identity, enabling women to renegotiate their roles, make autonomous decisions, and reclaim ownership of their time and personal histories.

Some interviewees recounted experiences in which migration represented a concrete opportunity for personal growth and self-affirmation. This is the case of those who succeeded in transforming a skill into an autonomous professional resource: *now I teach Arabic and French online ... I've started my own business* (#17 Tunisian woman, 32, alone, high education).

This testimony reflects a form of empowerment that has resulted not only in economic independence, but also in symbolic recognition and the capacity for future-oriented planning. Similarly, other women describe trajectories of autonomy gradually built through precarious yet formative work experiences: *I mostly worked to pay for my studies – so, waitress, babysitter; this past year I've also worked as a cultural mediator, so I've transformed my work compared to what I used to do when I was younger* (#18 Moroccan woman, 25, with relatives, middle education).

Nevertheless, this trajectory is not linear. Several interviews highlight the presence of structural, cultural and individual barriers that slow down or render the empowerment process fragile. Some women, despite being educated and highly motivated, report the lack of recognition of their qualifications or professional skills in the host country: *here, the process of degree recognition is very difficult* (#15 Moroccan woman, 28, married, middle education). Others express fears and insecurities that constrain their agency even in everyday situations: *I'm afraid of making mistakes ... sometimes he [my husband] answers for me ... I'm afraid of getting it wrong* (#14 Tunisian woman, 48, married, middle education).

It becomes clear that empowerment is not an isolated event, but rather a gradual and dynamic process through which many migrant women have succeeded in strengthening their psychological, educational and professional identities. This pathway has often been built through the achievement of economic independence and the progressive break from internalised patriarchal norms: *I thank God because I'm truly doing well here. I found a job – actually, it's a tough job – but for me it's good, because I earn, I live, and I am responsible for myself* (#19 Tunisian woman, 48, married, middle education). Yet despite significant individual progress, many of these women continue to encounter concrete obstacles that limit the full expression of the transformations they have undergone. Therefore, the reinforcement of empowerment should not be confined to the individual level but must be supported by structured and accessible tools, such as AVRR programmes. When such mechanisms are well-designed and oriented towards recognising the skills acquired, they may not only enhance the social and professional capital of migrant women but also reopen the possibility of an active and transformative return – one capable of overcoming the structural and cultural barriers that had previously constrained their autonomy.

Unfortunately, one of the most problematic aspects that emerged from the investigation concerns the awareness and accessibility of the legal instruments related to AVRR. The vast majority of the women interviewed stated that they had never heard of the programme or had only a vague and superficial understanding of it. The prevailing perception is that of a measure perceived as distant, abstract, and inadequately tailored to the concrete realities of female migratory experiences: *I have heard about it, but I've never*

looked into it in depth (#23 Moroccan woman, 24, with relatives, middle education); *No, I have never heard of AVRR* (#21 Tunisian woman, 30, married, low education).

This lack of information is compounded by the structural rigidity of the AVRR, which appears ill-suited to the specific needs of migrant women. Its standardised design tends to overlook key gender-related factors – such as caregiving responsibilities, prior experiences of violence, or complex transnational ties – making it poorly aligned with women's lived realities. As noted by a woman working in the reception sector: *I have never seen a single woman agree to return through AVRR* (#16, Tunisian woman, 58, with relatives, middle education), highlighting the widespread perception of the AVRR as unfeasible and disconnected from actual conditions.

In the absence of fully accessible and effective institutional mechanisms, social and informal networks often step in – at least partially – to fill this gap, providing material support, guidance and informal opportunities for integration. However, these relational resources also prove to be far from straightforward in their role of support and protection. The presence or absence of social and informal networks is a crucial variable in shaping the migratory trajectories of the interviewed women, significantly affecting both their subjective well-being and their real opportunities for inclusion.

Where active, such networks – whether family, community-based, religious or associative – play a central role in facilitating access to services, mediating linguistic and cultural barriers, and fostering new forms of everyday belonging. A Tunisian woman says: *I volunteered to help register mothers who are Arab, who cannot write, who do not speak the language. I also volunteered at the school library, the elementary school. If they need anything, I'm there to talk with the mothers, as a mediator, as a voluntary mediator* (#14 Tunisian woman, 48, married, middle education). This testimony demonstrates how even social and informal networks can serve as channels for recognition and the development of new skills, thus creating unexpected pathways to empowerment. However, social and informal networks do not always function as spaces of solidarity. In certain circumstances, they may also act as mechanisms of control and the reproduction of traditional norms, ultimately hindering individual attempts at emancipation. The constraints imposed by one's family of origin or by acquired kinship ties – such as parents-in-law or siblings-in-law – can take the form of normative pressures that interfere with the individual's capacity for self-determination. A particularly emblematic case is the testimony of a woman who denounced an oppressive family environment: *My brother-in-law was dealing drugs, I reported him, and I was persecuted as well* (#29 Tunisian woman, 32, married, middle education). This illustrates the vulnerability produced by dysfunctional family relations. In this regard, several testimonies reveal that migration has often been an attempt to escape forced marriages, domestic violence, or social marginalisation. One Tunisian woman recounts: *My brother wants me to marry my cousin. But I want a different husband. So ... I married another man. But my brother disagreed. He started threatening us. He caused us many problems* (#21 Tunisian woman, 30, married, low education). Gender-based constraints emerge as a cross-cutting structure shaping the entire migratory experience. Women frequently face a dual subordination: one imposed by the patriarchal norms of their country of origin, and another generated by the exclusionary mechanisms in host societies. Within this context, migration can at times take on the contours of a path toward emancipation. However, it may also reproduce patterns of dependence and subjugation, particularly in the absence of support networks or effective social policies.

The analysis of the interviews clearly reveals that the empowerment of migrant women cannot be understood as a final or isolated outcome, but rather as a situated and often arduous process that unfolds over time. This journey involves the renegotiation of the self, the attainment of financial autonomy, the recognition and enhancement of individual skills, and the breaking away from deeply oppressive family and cultural systems. Despite the presence of profoundly transformative individual trajectories, these processes largely develop in the absence of formal support mechanisms, which remain distant, inflexible, and insufficiently attuned to the specificities of female migratory experiences. Social and informal networks, while crucial, function both as catalysts for inclusion and recognition, and simultaneously as spaces where oppressive normative models are reproduced. It is precisely this tension between female agency and hostile contexts that underscores the urgent need for a profound political and institutional rethinking. In order for empowerment pathways to evolve into fully recognised and sustainable trajectories of self-determination – including in the context of return migration – it is essential to move beyond the current emergency-driven and standardised logic of support systems. What is required is a systemic and intersectional approach that places at its centre the subjectivity, plurality and complexity of women's migratory experiences.

4.2. Data discussions

The existing literature remains notably limited in addressing, in a thorough and nuanced way, the issue of empowering migrant women – particularly from a perspective that also considers the possibility, or the desire, to return to their countries of origin, from which they fled due to highly restrictive and oppressive conditions. It is precisely in this direction that this analysis is oriented, aiming to fill this gap by offering a situated and attentive perspective on the processes of subjectivation and the skills developed by migrant women throughout their experiences. Furthermore, it seeks to explore how these transformations may open up real opportunities for reintegration in their countries of origin.

The trajectories outlined in the theoretical framework are fully confirmed by the empirical analysis, highlighting the fact that return is not merely a reverse geographical movement, but rather a situated and complex process of identity, relational and emotional redefinition. Return emerges as a space of tension between desire and possibility, in which women's subjective experiences face concrete obstacles. The analysis reveals four main configurations that explain the difficulty of envisioning return. (1) Some women, who migrated as part of family projects, remain confined to subordinate roles lacking autonomy; in these cases, return is absent from their plans, as their primary focus remains the economic support of the family. (2) Others, who left alone to escape oppressive contexts, perceive return as a threat to the freedom they have gained. (3) A third group expresses a growing sense of estrangement from their country of origin, perceived as static or inconsistent with the changes they have experienced elsewhere. (4) Finally, there are women who, having built deep emotional bonds and a strong sense of belonging in Italy, do not consider return at all, as it has become distant on both symbolic and emotional levels.

The trajectories examined above highlight consistent relationships between age, social status and education level (Table 2). Women who migrate with their husbands tend to follow trajectories in which the subordination experienced within their family of origin

persists in the host context, where they remain subject to their authority and have limited opportunities to enhance their skills and capacities. Indeed, with few exceptions, many of these women display relatively low levels of education. This group also tends to consist predominantly of older women whose age reflects a stronger adherence to traditional family responsibilities in their country of origin. Having remained within the domestic sphere for a significant part of their lives, they often migrate later, accompanying their husbands in search of better economic opportunities abroad. By contrast, within the sample there are women who have long been residents in Italy, having moved there as children with their parents or relatives, as well as women who migrated alone or at a young age. For these groups, migration often represents an act of emancipation from an oppressive environment and the pursuit of personal independence. Many of these younger women – particularly those who migrated as children with their parents – have become firmly rooted in Italy, marrying local partners and managing to improve their social status, although some of them report difficulties in obtaining full recognition of their educational and professional achievements within the Italian context. While not encompassing the full range of possible experiences, these trajectories illustrate the absence of material and symbolic conditions that would make return a feasible and desirable option.

In particular, this trend persists among those who have developed professional and relational skills in the host country, yet without a clear expression of a desire to return. This apparent paradox can be attributed to a form of empowerment that, while present, remains fragile, uneven and insufficiently structured. In many instances, women are unable to transform their migratory experience into a forward-looking plan oriented towards return, precisely because the autonomy they have acquired is neither adequately supported nor recognised – either in the country of origin or in the host country. On the one hand, many of the skills women had developed prior to migration – whether academic, professional or experiential – go unrecognised in Italy, making it difficult for them to enter meaningful pathways of professional development and valorisation. On the other hand, the possibility of consolidating the skills acquired in Italy is often hindered by oppressive family conditions, in which freedom of expression and decision-making is severely constrained by the figure of the husband or by cultural contexts that continue to exert control and delegitimise women's autonomy. In these situations, the ability to exercise self-determination remains partial and vulnerable, and the idea of returning – which would entail the additional effort of reintegration – is not perceived as an opportunity, but rather as a risk of regression or the undoing of the emancipation pathways already undertaken. These critical issues clearly highlight that for women's empowerment to be effective and transformative, it must be supported by stable, accessible tools specifically aimed at training and enhancing their skills. In the absence of policies that assist migrant women in consolidating their professional and social capital – and in making it transferable even in their countries of origin – it becomes extremely difficult to envision return as a sustainable and desirable option.

In this regard, the data clearly reveal that AVRR programmes are largely inaccessible and ineffective. The vast majority of the women interviewed reported having never heard of such programmes. This highlights a structural deficiency: far from providing genuine support, existing return policies remain detached from the subjective and complex experiences of migrant women. The absence of adequate informational, linguistic,

psychological and practical support undermines the actual usability of these programmes, which consequently remain confined to a normative and administrative dimension, rather than serving as transformative and emancipatory tools.

In contexts marked by institutional voids, social/informal networks – whether family, associative, community-based or religious – often play a central role. When mobilised, these networks can provide guidance, accompaniment and everyday support, contributing to the construction of new forms of belonging and the recognition of acquired skills. However, such networks are not without critical issues: alongside their supportive and empowering functions, they may also act as mechanisms of control and reproduction of traditional norms, thereby hindering pathways to emancipation and limiting opportunities for self-determination. In some cases, dysfunctional family ties or the internalisation of patriarchal models continue to constrain women's autonomy. This analysis thus underscores how social and informal networks represent a pivotal – yet not neutral – factor in the trajectories of migrant women, and how their impact on return processes depends on the capacity to activate dynamics of recognition rather than subordination.

Despite the many challenges that have emerged, the voices of migrant women – especially in what they do not explicitly say about return – offer valuable insights for imagining concrete solutions that could make going back a real and dignified possibility. Their testimonies often avoid direct references to return, revealing a silence that is itself meaningful. These unspoken elements, alongside the needs they voice and their everyday strategies of resilience and adaptation, provide a critical foundation for rethinking current support mechanisms – often perceived as distant, inadequate, or disconnected from their lived experiences and personal trajectories.

The analysis strongly highlights the pressing need for effective recognition of the skills acquired by women, both in their country of origin and in the host country. The lack of validation for educational qualifications, professional experiences and language competencies not only restricts access to qualified employment opportunities but also deeply undermines women's self-confidence and their belief in the possibility of sustainable reintegration. In this context, return cannot be seen merely as a physical relocation; it is an event that requires comprehensive, social and educational support. Such support should enable women to valorise the knowledge and capabilities developed throughout their migratory journey, preventing this experience from being perceived as a rupture or a failure.

At the same time, women express the need for guidance and support tools that are genuinely accessible and designed around their lived experiences, languages, timeframes and family circumstances. Current centralised and standardised policies fail to capture the concrete dimensions of their lives or to establish an effective bridge between 'here' and 'there'. In the absence of flexible and culturally sensitive mechanisms, return risks remaining an abstract possibility – or worse, a forced decision devoid of agency and long-term planning.

Another significant aspect emerging from the testimonies concerns the need to intervene on the relational and family level. Many women continue to live in contexts where the ability to express their opinions or make autonomous decisions remains severely constrained. In such cases, return is not merely a logistical or economic matter; rather, it is deeply intertwined with the issue of self-determination. Without genuine empowerment – supported by targeted educational pathways and protective mechanisms – return risks

replicating the very oppressive dynamics from which migration initially sought to offer liberation.

In the light of the findings, this study proves to be not only adequate in highlighting the institutional and cultural challenges that hinder the possibility of sustainable return for migrant women, but also instrumental in developing alternative and more inclusive pathways. Investigating their trajectories allows for the design of more sensitive and transformative intervention mechanisms – ones that acknowledge female subjectivities as legitimate carriers of new imaginaries and possible futures.

To make this possible, it is essential to move beyond the current emergency-driven and standardised logic that characterises return policies. Instead, a systemic, intersectional and participatory approach must be adopted. Only in this way can conditions for reintegration be created that do not merely restore pre-existing balances, but fully valorise migratory experiences as vital resources for social transformation.

5. Conclusions

The study explores how return migration – particularly within the framework of AVRR – is experienced, negotiated and often rejected by Tunisian and Moroccan women residing in Italy. Through an in-depth analysis of the interviews and direct engagement with institutional actors and civil society organisations, the research shows that female return cannot be understood in isolation; rather, it must be situated within broader structures of gendered power, historical inequalities and transnational social transformations. Far from being a neutral or purely logistical passage, return emerges as a critical and meaning-laden moment in the migratory trajectory – one in which previous experiences of exclusion, processes of empowerment, identity transformations, and renegotiations of gender norms intersect.

For the women interviewed, return migration is rarely perceived as a desirable or viable option: their narratives revealed ambivalence, resistance or outright rejection of return, rooted in deep reflections on self-worth, hard-won autonomy and a desire for social recognition.

One of the key analytical contributions of this study lies in the gender-based reconceptualisation of return migration. Female trajectories are not shaped solely by economic needs or legal constraints but intersect with emotional landscapes, cultural codes, and bodily and identity transformations. While male return is often celebrated as entrepreneurial or successful (Patnaik et al., 2015), female return entails a double burden: on one hand, the devaluation of the skills and independence acquired abroad; on the other, the reimposition of traditional gender roles upon reintegration (Ruiz et al., 2015; Vlasse, 2013).

For many women, the migratory experience still marked a break from patriarchal control and opened new possibilities for self-realisation: daily autonomy and access to employment or education – experiences that, once internalised, often proved irreconcilable with expectations in their home contexts. As Pauli (2021) notes, the tension between a transformed self and a static social order can produce deep identity fractures, making return not only emotionally difficult but also structurally punitive.

The empirical findings also challenge the current configuration and implementation of AVRR programmes, particularly in Italy. Although the normative framework –

based on Directive 2008/115/EC – claims to promote a humane and dignified return, the women's narratives demonstrated limited knowledge of these programmes and widespread distrust in their relevance. The current AVRR system fails to take into account the specific needs and vulnerabilities of migrant women – such as previous experiences of gender-based violence, caregiving responsibilities, informal work trajectories, low legal literacy, and the cultural stigma associated with return.

As highlighted by Castellano (2024) and Miah et al. (2025), the omission of such elements results in programmes that may be functional from a bureaucratic perspective but are socially misaligned – ultimately reproducing the very exclusions they claim to address.

In the absence of tools for recognising and valuing the skills acquired abroad – whether linguistic, caregiving, digital or entrepreneurial – these programmes fail to ensure sustainable reintegration or offer truly dignified choices. Empowerment emerged as a key axis in the experiences and aspirations of the women involved, but it assumed complex, non-linear and often contradictory forms. For some interviewees, migration meant access to education, a professional identity and new relational autonomy; for others, it marked a more intimate and psychological transformation: the ability to speak, choose and imagine a different future. However, this empowerment did not always lead to stable or tangible outcomes. Its translation into sustainable agency depended on multiple factors: access to formal recognition of qualifications; the presence of reintegration-friendly environments in home countries; the nature of social networks – whether supportive or controlling; and, finally, the existence of flexible and inclusive public policies.

The results support previous arguments highlighted by Alsop (2023) and Borrillo (2019): empowerment without corresponding structural change and institutional support risks leaving women in a state of suspension, neither fully integrated into the host society, nor meaningfully reintegrated into their context of origin. As a result, return rarely appears as an opportunity but rather as a symbolic erasure of the autonomy gained.

A key dimension analysed is the essential yet ambivalent role of social networks and civil society in the return process. While formal institutions – such as IOM or government agencies – play a central role in AVRR programmes, the research findings highlight the often-underestimated contribution of civil society organisations: local NGOs, diaspora associations and women's cooperatives act as bridges between individual aspirations and institutional opportunities, offering emotional support, legal guidance and, in some cases, access to microfinance or training. However, these networks are not inherently emancipatory. Some testimonies revealed that family or community ties can instead become sources of control, surveillance and restriction of agency, especially for women returning to rural or conservative settings. It is therefore necessary to critically examine the relational dimension of return, recognising it both as a potential resource and a possible constraint.

In the light of the above issues, a series of policy recommendations has been formulated to construct a fairer and more effective return system. (1) The systematic integration of gender analysis into AVRR programmes: the caregiving roles of women, their exposure to violence, and non-linear migratory trajectories must be considered. (2) Some mechanisms should be implemented for the recognition and certification of informal skills acquired during migration, both in Italy and the countries of origin. (3) Return policies must be decentralised and promote concrete partnerships with local

organisations, diaspora networks, and women's collectives capable of building trust and ensuring continuity. (4) Last but not least, cultural mediation services and language access must be guaranteed at all stages of the return process to overcome communication barriers and administrative complexities that often discourage women.

Reintegration cannot end with repatriation. Long-term monitoring tools, mentoring and specific support are needed, especially for those launching small businesses or reintegrating into conservative contexts. Finally, return policies must be co-designed together: migrant women's voices should be heard not only through evaluation questionnaires but by asking for their contribution in policy-making processes, ensuring that the measures adopted are genuinely relevant and respectful of the women's dignity.

Return migration is a profoundly personal, relational and political process. For the women interviewed, the idea of 'going back home' is not merely a geographic matter; it touches on issues of identity, safety and social value. Many did not view return as a path to their original place of belonging, but rather as a risk of erasure – not so much a return to a place as a return to silence. The findings of the WE PROPOSE project confirm the need to radically rethink the architecture of return. Beyond statistics and bureaucratic practices lies a terrain shaped by emotional displacement, social struggle and a desire for recognition. Women's migratory trajectories are neither linear nor passive: they represent spaces of resistance, reinvention and learning. However, if the choices of return are not enhanced and supported by policies, these will still represent a traumatic rupture instead of being part of the empowerment process.

By placing migrant women's narratives at the centre of the analysis, this study contributes to the consolidation of a body of literature that forcefully demands a more inclusive, situated and gender-sensitive approach to migration governance (Riosmena, 2024; Setrana & Kleist, 2022). In an era in which European countries continue to scale up return processes, there is an urgent need to move away from security and control logics in favour of a participatory, rights-based model. Within such a new system, the return path can be reimagined not as the failure of integration or end of agency, but as an extension of the emancipation process, based on dignity and new possibilities.

In this light, the metaphor of the door and the bridge (Simmel, 1994/1909), mentioned in the introduction of this article, provides a good interpretive framework for understanding the meaning of migratory experience. As Simmel wrote, 'man is the connecting creature who must always separate and cannot connect without separating' (Simmel, 1994/1909, p. 6). This paradox perfectly captures the female migratory experiences analysed. Departure becomes a threshold passage – like a door – that separates women from their countries of origin and, at the same time, opens up new possibilities. In the cases analysed, the door is not simply a spatial shift but an actual existential transition, and the act of crossing the door represents both the separation and the opening.

Besides, in the words of Simmel, 'the bridge symbolises the desire to overcome separation – not by removing it, but by recognising it and spanning it' (Simmel, 1994/1909, p. 6), metaphorically portraying the migratory journey not just as a break with the past, but as a process of constructing bridges between different social worlds and different versions of the self. Women may leave behind patriarchal contexts, but they do not necessarily abandon their cultural or emotional ties. Instead, they attempt to 'reunite what has been separated – not to erase the boundary, but to make it bearable through connection' (Simmel, 1994/1909, p. 7).

From this perspective, return migration cannot be conceived as a simple homecoming or reversal, but rather as a renewed engagement with the threshold: a crossing that requires recognition of what has changed on both sides. Policies that ignore the in-depth complexity of this process risk closing the door – between the two worlds – instead of opening it. Return thus becomes a symbolic closure – i.e. an undoing of gained autonomy – rather than an enhancement of empowerment.

Rethinking return means embracing what Simmel describe as ‘the creative tension between connection and separation’ (Simmel, 1994/1909, p. 8): a dynamic that reflects the very essence of female migratory trajectories. Migration is not a linear process, nor is return a permanent choice. Both are steps positioned in the continuum of the migration process, in which each person reconstructs meaning, identity and belonging. In this way, return migration can truly become a space of possibility only if the bridges built by migrant women – between places, identities and stories – are recognised and supported in their right to cross them, perhaps over and over again, without losing fundamental traits of their personal identities.

Notes

1. In line with Abu-Lughod’s (2015) critical view of ‘saving’ narratives, we are conscious of the risks of framing women from Muslim-majority societies as passive subjects in need of emancipation through migration to countries of the Global North. As a research team composed of scholars based in Italy and Canada – one of whom hails from the Global South (Mexico) – we are particularly sensitive to the dangers of othering women from Tunisia and Morocco and positioning Europe as a site of emancipation in contrast to supposedly static or oppressive societies of origin. Life in Italy, while offering certain opportunities, can also be experienced as oppressive in other ways, particularly by Muslim women.
2. Italy transposed this directive through Decree-Law No. 89/2011, later converted into Law n. 129/2011, introducing Article 14-ter into the Consolidated Act on Immigration. This legal provision mandates the Italian Ministry of the Interior – often in partnership with regional authorities and civil society organisations – to implement return programmes. As of September 9, 2015, the European Commission indicated an action plan on AVRR including 36 concrete actions to improve the effectiveness of this model of migrant flow management according to 7 steps that include psychological and logistic support, travel arrangements, health care, financial allowance and in-kind support for reintegration in the country of origin (Castellano, 2022). Indeed, the AVRR system has been embedded in networks of NGOs, volunteers, and grassroots associations acting as an interface (Boccacin, 2012; Caselli, 2021) between state institutions and migrants, playing an essential role in promoting the economic autonomy and resilience of subjects involved in return processes (Marino & Lietaert, 2022).

Author contributions

CRedit: **Liana M. Dahér:** Conceptualization, Methodology, Supervision, Writing – original draft, Writing – review & editing; **Anna Maria Leonora:** Data curation, Methodology, Writing – original draft; **Eloy Rivas-Sanchez:** Validation, Writing – review & editing; **Giorgia Mavica:** Data curation, Formal analysis, Investigation, Writing – original draft; **Davide Nicolosi:** Conceptualization, Writing – original draft.

Disclosure statement

No potential conflict of interest was reported by the author(s).

Funding

This work was supported by the Ministry of University and Research (MUR) [grant number: P20224T9MP].

AI disclosure statement

Scholar GPT 5 was used to reformulate some sentences in order to enhance linguistic clarity.

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