

# Entrepreneurs emerge as a force in Europe's refugee emergency

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Camilla Hawthorne, assistant professor of sociology at the University of California, Santa Cruz, says economic stagnation and a resurgence of racist nationalism are shaping conversations about what it means to be Italian in the 21st century. Credit: Carolyn Lagattuta

The recent wave of immigration into Europe is nothing new for Italy; its proximity to Africa has made it a destination for years, particularly for sub-Saharan refugees. But geographers are keeping an eye on this gateway nation, where newly identified Afro-Italian youth are leading a movement to reform Italy's citizenship laws and women entrepreneurs are emerging as a force.

Camilla Hawthorne, assistant professor of sociology at the University of California, Santa Cruz, says economic stagnation and a resurgence of racist nationalism are shaping conversations about what it means to be Italian in the 21st century.

"Italy's economy is struggling, unemployment is high, the far-right won the recent election, and xenophobia is on the rise. These are trends we're seeing across Europe and elsewhere," said Hawthorne.

At the same time, Italy is now home to nearly 1 million Italian-born children of immigrants who, by law, lack citizenship. How the country responds to their demands for recognition and rights, and the emergence of Afro-Italian women entrepreneurs who are transforming notions of beauty and what it means to be Italian, will shape the future of the country, said Hawthorne.

"These people are the future of Europe. They make up 10 percent of Italy's youth population," said Hawthorne, author of an article in the current online issue of *Social & Cultural Geography*. "Birthrates of white Europeans are declining across Europe. Tensions are coming to a head in Italy because it is the first point of arrival for many immigrants, and black Italians are the most prominent group challenging the persistent conflation of whiteness with being Italian."

Italian citizenship law, known as *jus sanguinis*, or "right of blood," stipulates that Italian-born children of immigrants have no automatic right to Italian citizenship. Instead, at the age of 18, they have one year to prove they have lived in Italy continuously from birth. Otherwise, those who are not employed or enrolled in [higher education](#) are at risk of being deported to their parents' home country.

It's only in the last five or so years that [black youth](#) have begun calling themselves "Afro-Italian," according to Hawthorne. "They are beginning to collectively identify as 'Afro' or 'Black' and to mobilize politically from these identities," she said. "We are in the midst of the largest mass movement of people across borders in recent history. We can learn from what's happening in Italy."

## Entrepreneurs redefine what it means to be Italian

Hawthorne's article, "Making Italy: Afro-Italian Entrepreneurs and the Racial Boundaries of Citizenship," highlights the emergence of Afro-

Italian women entrepreneurs and their impact on dominant narratives about immigrants and "Italian-ness." These women specialize in black fashion, style, and hair-care products, and they are leveraging the internet to market their products, build community, challenge norms of Italian beauty, and expand the scope of the "Made in Italy" brand to include products made specifically for Afro-Italians.

- Italian-Ghanaian Evelyne Afaawua founded a Facebook page in Italian about the care of natural black hair, originally called "Afro Italian Nappy Girls." Based in Milan, Nappytalia is now a multi-platform social media presence, and Afaawua recently launched a line of organic natural hair products for black women; Nappytalia joins AfroRicci, another Afro-Italian enterprise and the first company to launch "Made in Italy" products for Afro-textured hair.
- The AFRO Fashion Association, founded in 2015 by Italian-Cameroonian journalist Michelle Ngonmo and Italian-Ghanaian fashion designer Ruth Maccarthy, launched the first Afro Fashion Week in the world's fashion capital of Milan in 2017. The event featured designers from Africa, as well as fashion inspired by African textiles, with an explicit goal of promoting a new culture the organizers called "Afro."

This new sense of "Italian-ness" unites the traditional Italian aesthetic with cultural influences drawn from subSaharan and Latin American black cultures; it is evident in the use of West African wax print fabrics in clothing, and the incorporation of cocoa and shea butters in Italian cosmetics.

"This marriage of African fabrics, colors, and patterns with Italian style stands in contrast to media depictions of an 'African invasion,'" said Hawthorne. "It counters resurgent racist narratives that immigrants are lazy or taking away jobs."

These women entrepreneurs are receiving widespread media coverage and building community and mobilizing for the rights and dignity of black women in Italy—a message that's being as well-received as their products. Their success has

the potential to awaken Italy's moribund economy and even to revitalize a stagnant nation.

"As Italy has embraced insularity and far-right, anti-globalist politics, it has lost some of its cosmopolitan flair," observed Hawthorne. "Rather than always being cast as Europe's outsiders, these new generations could be a cultural bridge that re-connects Italy to the rest of the world."

### **Inclusion/Exclusion: What does solidarity look like?**

The emergence of Afro-Italian youth activism and women's entrepreneurship represent a new chapter—but fissures could emerge.

Hawthorne cautions that Italy's entrepreneurial and activist "citizens-in-waiting" could be forced to pit themselves against newly arrived black refugees, who get labeled by the media and politicians as "unproductive."

"Citizenship can be a path to racial inclusion for Italian-born children of black immigrants, but at the same time, the reform of these laws could also become a tool of oppression against black refugees," noted Hawthorne. "Potential allegiances among black citizens-in-waiting and black refugees can't be taken for granted." Some activist youth worry about alienating themselves from their own immigrant parents as they pursue citizenship by portraying themselves as "authentically Italian."

Italy's embrace of far-right ethno-nationalism and the stunning failure of citizenship reform legislation in 2017 seems to have prompted Afro-Italian activists to engage more broadly, said Hawthorne.

"They are thinking beyond Italy," she said. "They're connecting with first-generation black immigrants and refugees, and linking their struggles to mobilizations in other places, like the Dreamers and the Civil Rights Movement in the United States. They are thinking about the legacies of Italian colonialism in Africa."

"Looking at the children who are being born in Italy today, the big question is who counts as Italian? Who counts as European?" said Hawthorne. "Afro-

Italian youth political activism is shifting to focus on anti-racism through broader black diasporic alliances. They are finding the answer in solidarity."

**More information:** Camilla Hawthorne, Making Italy: Afro-Italian entrepreneurs and the racial boundaries of citizenship, *Social & Cultural Geography* (2019). [DOI: 10.1080/14649365.2019.1597151](https://doi.org/10.1080/14649365.2019.1597151)

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