The Egyptian communities in Milan

Ideas of home, home-making, and care at the time of COVID-19[1]

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The Egyptian communities in Milan are among the oldest and largest migrant communities in Italy, their history dating back to the 1970s. Following in-depth ethnographic research, this article explores their members' representations and understandings of home, examining also Egyptian women's practices and role as driving forces underlying home-making processes. Moving from the Egyptian migrants' translations of *casa*, Italian word for "house, home," the article tries to disentangle the multifaceted meanings attached to the notions of *balad* (country, hometown, village), *bayt* (house), and *waṭan* (nation), which hold different social, political, and religious connotations and reflect different levels of integration in Italy. The research took place during the protracted lockdowns in Italy following the outbreak of the COVID-19 (SARS-CoV-2) pandemic, and therefore delving into the meanings of "home" has meant unraveling how the pandemic situation has increased the domestic care burden on women and how gender relations have changed under such unprecedented events. This article corroborates the hypothesis that care practices and home-making processes are key sites where society reproduces itself, and that accelerated social and historical transformations make gendered care practices within the home more explicit.

Keywords: Egyptian diaspora, Italy, home, care, home-making, migration

Based on ethnographic work among the Egyptian diaspora in Milan during the COVID-19 pandemic, this article offers a reconceptualization of "home" among Egyptian migrants through a critical discussion of how Egyptian migrants' conceptions of home shifted when measures aimed at containing the virus were enacted. Because Egyptians overwhelmingly work in the service industry in Milan, they were badly hit by the loss of employment that followed the Italian administration's implementation of lockdown and other public health measures. The redundancies of Egyptian workers, the children's home-schooling, and the need to protect elders from the virus increased the care burden on Egyptian women, quickly and dramatically altering gender relations within their households. This article traces the new understandings of home that emerged out of the reorganization of domestic life when Egyptian families living in Milan were forced to adjust to government-mandated public health measures. It explores how Egyptian migrants understand "home," first in connection to citizenship, belonging, and integration and, second, through the ways it shapes everyday practices and relations outside the house.

The Egyptian communities[2] in Milan are among the most numerous and oldest migrant groups in the city.

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1. Marta Scaglioni has authored the even pages, Eslam ElBahlawan the odd ones.

2. While writing on Egyptian migrants in Italy, the authors are uncomfortable with the term "community," as the Egyptian migrants appear to be highly heterogeneous. Moreover, the notion of community itself has undergone severe criticism, since it tends to identify a homogeneous and enclosed grouping, as it stems from a philosophical tradition in which it used to refer to national belonging

The Istituto Nazionale di Statistica (ISTAT)[3] calculated that around 141,000 Egyptians lived legally in Italy in 2020, making it the eighth largest group of legally residing migrants nationwide (Ministero del Lavoro e delle Politiche Sociali 2020). In 2020, 81 percent of Egyptians resided in the north, and around 66.7 percent of the total population was in Lombardy, Milan's region (Ministero del Lavoro e delle Politiche Sociali 2020). In 2019, ISTAT recorded 92,521 Egyptian nationals in the region of Lombardy and 63,205 in the district of Milan, including the city.[4] Egyptians make up the second most numerous group of foreign nationals in Milan (14.7 percent), after Filipinos.[5]

The situation of women is of particular significance. Egyptian women in the diaspora are often represented as averse to migration because most of them hold a visa for family reasons (Ferrero 2016: 40). Most of them followed their husbands to Italy after Italian law recognized the right to family reunification in 1986 and Egypt eased restrictions on married women's rights to mobility.[6] Their low level of employment in Italy has led authors to theorize a "feminization of the house" rather than of "migration" (Ferrero 2016: 41). Egyptian women, in fact, do tend to dwell in the domestic sphere, especially right after getting married and as long as their children

are preschoolers. Some of them nevertheless have medium to high educational levels achieved in the home country. When their children start attending school, Egyptian women begin to gather around social places like schools, mosques, and hospitals, and start interacting with Italian society at large. This suggests that we must complicate the "feminization of the house" theory.

The COVID-19 (SARS-CoV-2) pandemic, during which some Egyptian women demonstrated high degrees of initiative, offers a fruitful opportunity for reconsidering conceptions of home and the construction of domesticity in the Egyptian diaspora. During the protracted lockdowns, some Egyptian women, seeking to relieve the economic problems of the Milanese population, engaged in diverse charity activities. What emerged out of their various initiatives is that they shifted care from the private sphere of the house to the public space. In the process, their attitudes toward the welfare state and their care practices at home changed. Following critical feminist thinking of the everyday as intrinsically geopolitical (Wallace 2011), this article seeks to overcome the fictive separation of a political "public" and a nonpolitical "private" by showing how domestic care practices among some Egyptian women in Milan have connected to the extra-domestic sphere during the COVID-19 pandemic and have started to demonstrate intense political meanings. In this context, shared rules and routines, fundamental components of the daily practice of homemaking, constitute a lexicon in which to read patriarchy and gender inequalities (Bonfanti, Chen, and Massa 2022: 5), and they will be treated in this article both as tools to exert power and authority but also as ways to gain relevance in public and political spaces.

During domestic confinement in Italy, the overlap between the productive and the reproductive sphere, the organization of domestic life, and the obligations linked to waged care work were shown to adversely impact women (Sanò 2020). That is, much of the burden of work and care both in and outside the home fell disproportionately on women. Adopting a gendered lens of inquiry, this article focuses on the care practices of a charity association, Giovani per il Bene (Youth for Good, or in Arabic شَباب الخَير, *shabāb al-khayr*),[7] which aimed to relieve economic and social problems of the Italian population during the lockdowns by delivering

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(Gallissot, Kilani, and Rivera 2001: 71). Egyptians in Milan are better characterized as a "network of isolated groups" rather than a community in its classic sense. As "community" appears empirically wrong, the authors understand Egyptians in Milan as "immigrant collective identities [which] are continuously negotiated in relation to their imagined audiences . . . [and are] argued over and are responsive to local and international political events" (Werbner 2012: 220). The term "communities," in the plural, will be preferred, with the aim of conveying Egyptian migrants' heterogeneity and of putting their practices and discourses in conversation with imagined spaces, that is, nations, countries, homes, and with the international public health events, namely pandemic-related, and political events occurring in 2020 and 2021.

3. National Institute of Statistics: https://www.istat.it/en/.

4. https://www.tuttitalia.it/lombardia/provincia-di-milano /statistiche/cittadini-stranieri/egitto/.

5. https://www.comune.milano.it/documents/20126/2313917 /10naz+prev+2019.pdf/8fbcbfdd-6a8a-e1e4-f660-eb6 dad160f0e?t=1596463322422.

6. https://riad-riad.com/women-rights-under-egyptian-law /#freedomOfMovement.

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7. All Arabic terms have been transliterated according to the IJMES transliteration system: https://www.cambridge .org/core/services/aop-file-manager/file/57d83390f6ea 5a022234b400/TransChart.pdf.

goods, medicines, and other things. It will document how gender ideologies, self-representations, and public roles have changed within and outside the households of those who are involved in the association.

A few words about the circumstances in which our research was conducted are in order. As the seriousness of the health crisis became clear, the Italian government took strict measures to contain the spread of the virus.[8] On January 31, 2020, the Council of Ministers declared a state of emergency, followed by a ban on travelers entering the country and the progressive establishment of "red zones" which culminated in a national lockdown, meaning the shutdown of all unnecessary activities, and restrictions on movements and on gatherings. At the beginning of May 2020, following the decrease in the rate of infections, the government eased the restrictions, but safety measures and general advice on how to avoid viral transmission remained in place. Justified by the extremely high death toll, social relations were considerably limited. This meant that social scientists had to avoid in-person fieldwork, developing new methods of data collection, such as mediated forms and online interactions (Lupton 2020). Our research was initially focused on aging processes within the Egyptian diaspora in Milan.[9] The methodological tools for this research were refined to cope with such an unprecedented and unpredictable event. Participant observation was mostly employed prior to the COVID-19 period, but after March 2020 our methodology expanded to include telephone interviews and online survey research tools (mainly online questionnaires). These new forms of data collection necessarily limited the pool of interlocutors to digitally educated subjects but were counterbalanced by face-to-face interactions in multifaceted "contact zones" (Pratt 1986), such as mosques, Coptic churches, and cafés, that is, places which are attended for a variety of purposes, such as humanitarian, social, religious, leisure, and political activities. Older members of the Egyptian communities were not easily accessible by phone, so the authors managed to establish trust re-

lationships with people they already knew, from pre-lockdown attendance at the mosque in the South-Eastern district of Corvetto, in via Padova, and in several Egyptian/Arab cafés. The fieldwork came to an end in June 2021.

The Egyptian communities in Milan

The presence of the Egyptian communities in Italy goes back to the 1970s, when migration to Italy started in an episodic fashion, following the bilateral agreements signed between the two countries in 1972.[10] In that period, Egyptian President Anwar el Sadat (1970–1981) inaugurated an "expansive policy" (1974–1984) (Coslovi and Zarro 2008: 17), encouraging permanent[11] emigration to Western countries. In 1973, Sadat started the *infitah* policy, which "means opening up the Egyptian economy for direct private investment, both Arab and foreign" (Abdel-Khalek 1981: 395), according to a neoliberal paradigm which tipped the balance from the Soviet Union to the Western world. This had repercussions on migration: Sadat suspended the exit visa in 1974 (Coslovi and Zarro 2008: 18).

Egyptians who participated in the first wave of immigration to Italy[12] were overwhelmingly male, had a high level of education, and were urbanites. Some were political dissidents who could not access humanitarian protection because at that time Italian law granted asylum only with geographical reservations, de facto limiting it to Soviet citizens (Colucci 2018: 22). Therefore, the first migrants arrived with a tourist or student visa. For them, Italy was the first choice, and some of them were Copts, fleeing political repression and historical policies of minoritization. Most of them found a job without the need to resort to premigratory networks.

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8. All information is taken from the Civil Protection Department website: http://www.protezionecivile.gov.it/doc uments/20182/1227694/Summary+of+measures+taken +against+the+spread+of+C-19/c16459ad-4e52-4e90 -90f3-c6a2b30c17eb.

9. Our research was supported by the project TAAD, The Aging African Diaspora, funded by Fondazione Cariplo and based at the University of Milan-Bicocca (Principal Investigator Alice Bellagamba): https://taad.it/.

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10. https://www.milanoattraverso.it/ma-comunita/4/com unit%C3%A0-egiziana-di-milano/.

11. Egyptian migration to Western countries has been defined as "permanent" to distinguish it from that to Arab countries, which has been described as "temporary." This has little to do with the actual length of stay of Egyptians in the host countries, but rather with the different policies regarding immigration in Arab (especially Gulf) countries, designed to deter integration (Coslovi and Zarro 2008: 20).

12. This refers to Egyptian migrants who arrived in Italy before the 1990s. "Second-generation" Egyptians are more recently immigrated subjects.

Ibrahim,[13] a Copt residing in the eastern part of Milan, told us:

> We come from Cairo. I arrived in April 1977. In Italy because I had a friend and because I liked art, literature, I wanted to see Michelangelo's masterpieces. Then to work and find a job here. When I arrived, I started with some Egyptians [sic], some restaurants to work as a dishwasher. I was looking for foreigners. There were few foreigners, few Egyptians.

Many Egyptians started working as dishwashers, gradually pursuing careers in the restaurant business and ending up owning their own pizzerias and bakeries. These careers, starting from the bottom, with the acquisition of specific skills on the job, together with a marked entrepreneurial inclination, can be identified as the core characteristics of Egyptians in Milan (Ambrosini and Abbatecola 2004: 359). First-generation Egyptians integrated well and show a high percentage of mixed marriages. For example Said, also belonging to the Coptic community:

> I came, I looked for jobs, I looked for jobs, I worked in a gas station . . . then I bought the gas station. One thing and another; I opened two restaurants; I opened the bakery. I was (a) born entrepreneur, my father bestowed something upon me. I have a factory producing plexiglass, plastic stuff. I resell. Now I have a factory, a bakery, and a bar. I have two kids and a Pomerian. With a Moldavian woman. She used to work here behind the counter.

Egyptians' immigration to Italy reached its peak in the 1990s, when a decrease in the demand for unskilled labor reduced the Egyptian presence in Arab countries (Coslovi and Zarro 2008: 20). Also, from the 1990s onwards Egyptian women started joining their spouses or migrating with them (Ambrosini and Abbatecola 2004: 358), and this trend has gradually increased since then. An Egyptian Muslim woman, Layla, stated:

> I have been here for twelve years. In Egypt I was an entrepreneur, and I had my family business, inherited from my father. I ran it. Then, my husband decided to come back to Italy and be there forever, full-time [he was coming and going, had a small cleaning business]. I had to change places, I had to go with him. I

did not know Italian, it took me almost three years, then I did a lot of courses, to find a job. Accountant, safety in the workplace . . . until I managed to get into a cultural mediator course. After that, I found a job.

From the 1990s onwards, similar to many other European countries, Italy experienced an increase in illegal immigration, a phenomenon also involving the Egyptian communities, since the current legislation tends to foster illegality rather than fight it.[14] From 2000 onwards, exacerbated by the 2002 Bossi-Fini law and the 2008 economic crisis, the life and work conditions of immigrants in Italy became increasingly precarious, as they fall in and out of the job market and of legal permission to reside in the country (Colucci 2018: 142). Currently, immigration to Italy is regulated by a quota-based system (*decreto flussi*), which makes migrants' first entry dependent on a preexisting contact with an employer in Italy. Through *decreto flussi*, Egyptian entrepreneurs have resorted to premigratory social and familial networks to find and attract manpower from Egypt. Second-generation Egyptians, therefore, appear more homogeneous regarding geographical origin; specifically, many come from the Faiyum governorate. However, in comparison to the less recently immigrated subjects, their internal composition is more heterogeneous, including also lower educational and socioeconomic levels and rural origins. In Italy, they are often employed in low-skilled jobs, such as construction work (especially as plasterers), or as workers at the Central Market in Milan, unloading goods, and as cleaners.

Egyptian men, as first migrants, tend to arrive with their wives who belong to their social or familiar networks, and often to a higher social class than the migrants' one. Migration, in fact, enhances the social status of those who emigrate within their context of origin.

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13. All interlocutors' names have been anonymized to protect their privacy.

14. Nowadays, the relations between Italy and Egypt regarding migration are regulated by the 2005 "Agreement between the Italian Republic and the Arab Republic of Egypt on cooperation with regard to migration flows for the purpose of work" and by the 2007 bilateral agreement on the readmission of illegal migrants. An organic attempt at managing migrants' presence occurred in 1990 (Legge Martelli), when the geographical reservation was abolished, and the regulation of migration was delegated to peripheral institutions. The two other comprehensive laws on migration were Legge Turco Napolitano (1998) and Bossi-Fini (2002), stemming from an anti-immigration stance in the wake of anti-Muslim sentiment after 9/11.

Sometimes Egyptian men leave their families—wife and children—"behind" in Egypt, to preserve the offspring's religious and cultural identity (Ferrero 2016). Nowadays, the Egyptian diaspora in Italy is still strongly gendered: with only 33.2 percent women in 2020 (Ministero del Lavoro e delle Politiche Sociali 2020), migration from Egypt to Italy is still a "male business."

As they rarely reproduce the social and geographical proximity in the receiving country (Ferrero 2016: 41), they appear as "silent and little visible" (Ambrosini and Abbatecola 2004: 247) in the popular mindset of Italians. Egyptian women appear as even more "invisible," as they tend to dwell in private spaces, showing how gender and the institutional status intersect tightly when it comes to migration. This perception is also supported by the fact that Egyptian migrants do not dwell in a precise geographical area in Milan (contrary to, for instance, Chinatown) and are not connected to some specific professional domains, even if they are indeed specialized in some job sectors.

As already mentioned, Egyptian migrants in Italy first looked for employment in restaurants and bakeries. They soon showed a highly entrepreneurial attitude and opened their own businesses, which fall into the category of "open" enterprises, that is, activities that do not refer to the foreign origin of their owners, or that do not target foreigners per se (Ambrosini and Boccagni 2004: 41). Egyptians entered one the most Italian sectors, that of pizzerias. In 2016, the Chamber of Commerce in Milan estimated that 50 percent of individually-owned pizzerias in the city[15] were owned by migrants, 66 percent of whom were born in Egypt.[16] The near totality of the entrepreneurs were men, showing once again that Egyptian women who immigrated were primarily homemakers.

Bayt, waṭan, balad
Ideas of home among Egyptian migrants refer both to physical and imaginary entities. As the experience of migration entails both a diachronic process and a displacement in space, houses hold a specific importance within the process of migration. They have to be analyzed not only as containers of social and symbolic processes (Lévi-Strauss 1983) or sites where society repro-

duces itself (Bourdieu 1976), but also as places to be explored per se and as they hold material meanings within the diaspora. Even though "house" stands in the popular understanding for the household in its materiality—furniture, bricks—and "home" relates more to feelings such as affection and intimacy, the distinction is not hard and fast (Samanani and Lenhard 2019). When asked to translate *casa*, the Italian word for "house" or "home," our interlocutors provide various translations. *Bayt* ("house") reflects a more physical place, while *waṭan* ("homeland") and *balad* ("country," "hometown," "village") relate to an imagined community. For Egyptians in Milan, "home" and "house" are comprehensive concepts, which go beyond the minimal definition of house as a space under control (Douglas 1991: 289) to delineate a site where kinship, citizenship, and symbolic relations are made and reproduced: "*waṭan* is the country of nationality and the country of my parents," "it is the place of my origin (*ʾaṣlī*) and roots (*judhūrī*)," say two Coptic Egyptians, Miriana and Amany.

Waṭan, the most often quoted translation of "casa," connects semantically also to "homeland." Many interlocutors point to Egypt when challenged on where their *waṭan* is. The term assumed a political connotation after the eighteenth century, and originally stood for "place of birth or of residence" in classic Arabic use (Lewis [1988] 1991: 47). *Waṭan* is, therefore, the place of birth, thus Egypt. After the emergence of Egyptian nationalism in the nineteenth century, the boundaries of *waṭan* expanded from the particular village or town where one was born to the whole country (Ansari 1959: 231). The concept of *waṭaniyya* (patriotic nationalism) comes semantically from the same root.

At the center of recent refugee studies (Brun and Fàbos 2015; Lems 2018) and anthropological material culture studies (Miller 2001), houses in their materiality and as (re)producers of social relations have gained increased attention recently. Specifically, forced migrations have problematized the idea of home as a haven and as something taken for granted, highlighting the processual and conflictual nature of home-making (Brun and Fabos 2015). The constructedness of home has been also discussed in feminist thinking, which unravels the gendered differentials in accessing domestic resources, labor, and spaces, and unveils women's "homey role" as intrinsically depriving them of identity and projects (Young 2005).

Within the Egyptian communities in Milan, "houses" are multidimensional concepts. They are often translated as *buyūt* (plural of *bayt*, "house") when they refer to places or spaces, and as *balad* and *waṭan* when they encompass

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15. The data do not include international and national chains.

16. https://www.milomb.camcom.it/documents/10157/29535756/pizzerie-italia-2016.pdf/5db1e018-0de9-45dc-bff2-f8a48a437490.

feelings. "For me, *balad* [country, hometown] is the home (*waṭan*), and house ["casa"] is *bayt*" says Samraa, a Muslim man. *Bayt* refers more to the building, as shown by the association with something which can be bought and sold: "*bayt* can be anywhere because you buy and sell any house anywhere" adds Marwa. However, it also refers to the family unit, as it is the case for migrants' families living together in Italy. Juxtaposed to *waṭan* and *balad*, *bayt* is located in Italy: *waṭanī maṣr baladī maṣr baytī huwa al-mawgud fī Iṭāliyā* (my home is Egypt, my country is Egypt, my house is that which is present in Italy), Doha, a young Muslim woman, told us. Mustafa describes the term with poetic words: "my homeland (*waṭanī*) you are the warm embrace where I smell my mother's scent and feel my father's safety." *Waṭan* is associated with Egypt, family, and feelings: "*waṭan* is Egypt and family," "*waṭan* is the place where I feel my humanness and the love of its people, and I love its people" are common remarks among the Muslim Egyptian population in Italy. *Waṭan* is therefore connected to a sense of safety and to a feeling of connectedness. Coptic Egyptian migrants' answers are in line with Muslims' ones: "my country (*baladī*) is Egypt, my home (*baytī*) is my family's place, my land (*ʾarḍī*) is in my country, my homeland (*waṭanī*) is where I belong."

Houses, and related concepts of nation, country, and homeland, indicate both places of origin and of destination. Considering the structural and existential vulnerability at the core of migration, houses within diasporas often refer to an aspiration rather than to an achievement (Bonfanti, Chen, and Massa 2022: 2). They can be useful points of entry into the representations they produce regarding political and citizenship belonging, questioning the sedentarism and exclusive nature implicit in Western ideas of nationality. Miriana, a Coptic woman, said to us:

> These questions have been repeated and presented to us since we set foot in this country, and of course they asked our children in primary and middle schools. My daughter was asked by one of her teachers: "are you Egyptian or Italian?" She replied "I am Italian, I was born, raised, lived, and educated in Italy, but Egypt is the country of nationality and the country of my parents, I love it and I go there on holidays and enjoy it." The answer to my daughter was that you are not Italian, you are an immigrant and you need help with the language. My daughter collapsed and cried and began to reply that she is Italian, but nobody listened, and they forced to her to attend afternoon lessons in the Italian language, even though she does not need

[them] at all. And their refusal to integrate our children into Italian society and impose their sense of not belonging to this country. From my point of view, it is a carefully studied policy. They will not accept or take seriously that Arabs can be nonimmigrants. I emphasize the word "Arab."

Reflections on "house" and "home" can convey analytic windows onto how migrants' families cope with the social invisibility embedded in the Italian immigration policies, as, for example, the imposition of Italian language courses on migrants' children.

The conceptualization of "nation" also provides insights into the political situations of the two countries, Italy and Egypt, which are inevitably imaginative platforms for visualizing the future through long-term plans such as returning to one's country of origin. Doha reiterates a common thought within the Egyptian diaspora in Italy: "home (*waṭan*) is the place where I live in safety": *ʾaman* (safety) is an often-quoted word when talking about "home"—*al- waṭan huwa al- ʾaman wa al-istiqrār* (home is safety and stability). As shown by Leonardo Schiocchet (2019), *istiqrār* identifies steadiness (stability) and settlement for Arabic-speaking refugees in Austria. Dina Makram Ebeid (2012) has argued that *istiqrār* in Egypt is a mode of governamentality that resonates within people's everyday life, setting the conditions for a "good life" in the context of the family. Similarly, Egyptians in Milan define *waṭan* on the theoretical level as a stable place where you can settle, enjoying a "good life." Italy does not provide the sense of being "stable," in the sense of giving Egyptians the feeling of being settled or integrated. On the other side, Egypt is perceived as a much beloved country but bankrupt (*muflisa*) where you cannot invest (*mish hastathmir*), even though many people are indeed investing, buying houses or assets for their families.

Ibrahim is forty-two years old, comes from the Delta area, and belongs to the second generation of Egyptians. He bought a taxi for his brother, in Egypt, and states clearly that he would like to return. The myth of return has been analyzed in academic literature since the seminal work by Muhammad Anwar (1979) on Britain's Pakistani population. Stuck between two countries, immigrants are often motivated by the idea of return (Cekmak 2021), even if this rarely happens in practice. In Milan, ideas on return differ greatly between the first- and second-generation Egyptian migrants. Nina Glick Schiller and Georges Fouron (2001) have noted that ideas of national identity in Haiti are shaped by

transborder phenomena such as migrants' remittances and their relations to those who stay: among Egyptian migrants, similarly, both those who go and those who stay are involved in and affected by transnational migration.

Said, a fifty-nine-year-old Copt, comes from Alexandria from a middle/upper-class family. He belongs to the first generation, as he migrated to Milan in the 1970s. He states:

> No, I don't want to return. Never. I don't even go to Egypt on vacation because my children want to go to Barcelona. I can't oblige my son. My father died four years ago, my brothers and sisters . . . they don't bother.

For second-generation Egyptian migrants, on the other side, ideas of homeland often intertwine with a feeling of nostalgia of the past, which identifies homeland with childhood and materializes in an idealized return. Mona, who arrived in Milan in 2008, told us: "I came with an agreement: in six months, if I don't like it, the country, I'll come back." She never did, but still keeps strong ties with her family of origin, which, for their part, the first-generation Egyptians have gradually lost. Coptic and Muslim Egyptians hold different stances vis-à-vis the idea of returning: for Copts it is not an option, since they feel threatened and discriminated against by a largely Muslim society.

> I don't go back because I am Italian and I am a Copt. Both. Being a Copt today is difficult. We Copts are infidels for Muslims. They are killing each other. When there is a church, Muslims have to build their mosque soon. You don't know how long you have to wait to get the permission to build a church. Now they passed a law, but just now. Last two years they passed a law to build new churches, but before? There are many churches but compare them with the number of Christians there, I don't know. Then in Cairo it's another thing, but go to the countryside . . . I did not invest in Egypt, no.

The Copts' right to their own religion is experienced as central, and many fear even physical persecutions if they go back to Egypt. Egyptians who migrated in the 70s came to Italy with the idea of finding an open, multireligious society, or at least a safe haven for Christians. Said, a Coptic pizzeria owner, told us:

> At the beginning, when I arrived here, nobody asked what religion we belonged to. We were the first. Gradually the Coptic Church has grown and the Patriarch

[*sic*]. There's Senato Street the first and then Teocrito Street and Melchiorre Gioia Street there are many . . . We are not in touch with the Coptic community, for us the Church is [to] go there on Sunday, go to the mass, and come back. We don't have any help, nor a community talking to each other, when there are problems. We don't have time!

Said here refers to the closure of his pizzeria due to the national lockdown in the sppring of 2020, when he felt "abandoned," both by the state and by its Egyptian/ Coptic communities. For him, his pizzeria is both a professional activity and a place he calls home, where all his family is employed. In pandemic emergency times, he felt betrayed by his religious community, which should represent a tight network of support.

Home and home-making practices at the time of COVID-19

Aside material, political, social, and religious meanings, houses among the Egyptian diaspora have to be analyzed as gendered constructions, bringing gender in as a useful analytical category to examine quotidian and gender relations within the house, as well as issues of domestic care. Gender emerged strongly in the everyday during the protracted lockdowns which followed the COVID-19 pandemic in 2020.

In September 2020, the European Parliament published a study on the socioeconomic effects of the COVID-19 pandemic. The results show how the mechanisms introduced by EU governments to mitigate against disease transmission impacted men and women differently, as the latter paid the highest socioeconomic and psychological toll.[17] In post-2020 Italy, women juggle paid and unpaid work with high mental and psychological consequences. "The SARS-CoV-2 crisis has (also) a gender,"[18] and one may add that it has also a race, following an intersectional approach which sees the pandemic laying bare the profoundly hierarchical, racist, and

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17. https://oeil.secure.europarl.europa.eu/oeil/popups/fiche procedure.do?lang=en&reference=2020/2121(INI).

18. "Die Notwendigkeit einer feministischen Analyse der Corona-Krise. Ausgangspunkte für eine demokratische, solidarische und intersektionale Gesellschaftsvision," June 12, 2020, available at: https://www.uni-giessen.de /fbz/zmi/sektionen-zmi/sektion-medienundgender /aktivitaeten_folder/feministische_analyse_corona-krise.

patriarchal organization of our society.[19] Home-making practices are key ethnographic platforms from which to query gender relations at the time of COVID-19 and how they have changed. Focusing on migrants' communities can help us shed light on how performances, resistances, and risk-management strategies contribute to the creation of home spaces. Moreover, care and care labor, inherent in the daily practices of home-making, can illuminate key aspects of political belonging, as Tatjana Thelen and Cati Coe (2019) have shown in the case of elder care. Also, echoing Miriam Ticktin's (2011: 6) words, migrants are key ethnographic sites for the analysis of what "politics" means in our world, because it is there that borders lie, and political action is shaped.

In 2020, the care burden for Egyptian women significantly increased, due to the necessity of keeping elders safe, homeschooling, and unprecedented layoffs targeting many Egyptian men. In general, the Egyptian communities have shown high levels of contagion[20] and high unemployment rates during the pandemic period. The catering and food sector, in fact, was undoubtedly one of the most hit by the prolonged and intermittent lockdowns, as it lost thirty-eight billion euros in 2020,[21] leading many restaurants to close down permanently. The shutdowns and closures had particularly harsh impacts on the Egyptian communities, as many of their members were employed as restaurant workers. Mariam, a stay-at-home Muslim mother, reported:

> My husband lost his job. He was working as a pizzaiolo in this restaurant. They are still open, they deliver, but the work is less and they decided to leave someone

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19. Kimberlé Crenshaw speaking at the webinar "Under the Blacklight: The Intersectional Failures that COVID Lays Bare," March 2020, available at: https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=OsBstnmBTaI.

20. On May 8, 2020, the *Istituto Superiore di Sanità* (ISS) published a study on the contagion rates among migrants in Italy: 1.8 per thousand Egyptians were infected: https://www.ismu.org/the-impact-of-covid-19-on-migrants-in-italy-local-contagion-and-global-health/.

21. https://www.fipe.it/comunicazione/note-per-la-stampa/item/7581-ristorazione-38-miliardi-di-perdite-nel-2020-fipe-confcommercio-e-sindacati-scrivono-a-patuanelli.html#:~:text=Fipe%2DConfcommercio%20e%20Sindacati%20scrivono%20a%20Patuanelli,-dimensione%20font%20riduci&text=Il%202020%2C%20l'annus%20horribilis,del%20settore%20andato%20in%20fumo.

at home. My husband worked on call and he remained at home. We don't know how to survive, I don't work. My brother is also here from Egypt. In Egypt he was a vet, he wanted to apply for the equivalence of his title here but offices don't work now, everything is stopped.

Or in the tourist sector in general. Ramadan, a Muslim old man, told us:

> I used to work in a hotel, in the laundry. When it closed down, I was already having economic problems. I found myself in a homeless shelter, I have to leave it in two weeks and I don't know what to do. I only find jobs in the market, but I have problems with my arm, I can't lift weights.

Egyptian women show low employment rates and were therefore less hit in this respect by the crisis, like Mona, who said:

> At the beginning it was . . . them [men], those who came here first were them. Anyway, I came here for family reunification [purposes], with my husband. I am part of those women who are housewives because they followed [their] husbands. You don't find lots of workers [among women] they are few anyway.

Much as for British Muslim women (Phillips 2009), the place of Egyptian women in a house, according to Islamic gendered normativity, is connected to the ascribed role of mother and wife. During the lockdowns, many Egyptian women found themselves in extremely critical economic conditions following the layoffs of their husbands. Moreover, many Egyptian women had to deal with the death of their spouses due to COVID-19, such as Raudha:

> My husband died in May, he was seventy-two but still worked with my elder son, they had an import/export company of agricultural machines. Without him, everything is stopped. The other son works as an electrician and brings home some money, but it is never enough. I struggle to hide the economic situation from my sons, because one is going to university, and I don't want him to drop out. We receive food aid from the mosque, we don't buy anything, but still there are rent and bills. I am very afraid of getting evicted.

In this case, Raudha found herself in a lower social class:

I used to work as linguistic and cultural mediator in schools, but now schools are closed. In addition, my husband used to drive me, I don't have a driving license. No money to register in a driving school now. I started looking for jobs, all I found were jobs as a cleaning lady and I have serious health issues, I can't bend for long hours. I wanted a job in an office, a call center, something like that. I experienced racism. I test the hirers: when they don't want Arabs, they don't even answer when you talk to them. They turn their faces. I became the family man, and I don't know what to do.

Unpaid or nonwage domestic labor is constituent of home-making processes and is defined as everyday practices, such as "raising children, cooking, cleaning . . . caring for elderly relatives, shopping, household management, as well as mental tasks such as planning schedules and performing emotional labor such as tending family relationships" (Power 2020: 67). The concept of "kinwork," as defined and elaborated by Linda M. Burton and Carol Stack, grasps, in part, the labor of Egyptian women in Milan at the time of COVID-19. In their definition, kinwork is "the labor and tasks that a family needs to accomplish to survive from generation to generation" (1993: 157). As part of practices of home-making, kinwork includes domestic tasks and housework labor but encompasses also "the architectural, aesthetic, and moral production of a particular kind of home" (Leinaweaver, Marre, and Frekko 2017: 563). Egyptian women in Milan are considered to be transmitters of cultural values and identities, aside from material activities such as shopping, cooking, and cleaning.

All interviewees agreed that domestic labor has significantly increased in the last years, with the need to incorporate disease-avoiding practices. Abir, for example, told us in May 2020:

I started to go to the market myself, because my mother is too old . . . too at risk. I decided to isolate her and ask my younger son to bring her medicines. My son was doing homework at home, so I was helping him, leaving him alone with his PC, waking him up, preparing him lunch so he could study.

Following the retrenchment of the welfare sector well before the COVID-19 epidemic (Minelli and Redini 2012) and a strong reliance on familial ties to provide assistance (Näre 2013), Italy has maintained a strong gendered culture of care, which is often sustained by racialized women's labor (Marchetti 2014). Within migrants' households, on the other hand, relying on outside labor is still rare,

and migrant women are often the sole providers of assistance for elderly and disabled individuals. Before 2020, Egyptian women used to perform all the tasks which are connected to home-making, but some of them were consistently helped by their familial network. Hala, a Muslim housewife, complained:

My parents are here, they are old. They also help me with the maintenance of the house, but, after COVID, I had to take care. I don't work. I was doing a course in Rozzano, before, but now I can't do anything. I graduated in chemistry in Egypt, I was working in a lab. In Italy, I learned Italian and took the middle school certificate together with my son. I am a person who can't stay still, never. Now I am staying at home, the whole day.

The daily care practices have to incorporate and manage the risk of transmitting the disease. The way in which the concept of "risk," referring to the possibility of getting infected by the SARS-CoV-2 virus, is understood is influenced by wider cultural and social frames. Risk management strategies in the Egyptian communities are deeply embedded in processes of making sense of ideas such as pollution and dirt and are linked to Islamic notions of "fate." Risk is therefore contextually invoked together with destiny. Abir, for example, went on saying:

You don't have to have guilt feelings if you infect someone in the family, because the disease is something from God. If God gives us a disease, He gives us the cure as well. He wants something from us. What can I do? Me, myself? Nothing. We have the duty to try to survive. But if we don't, we did enough.

"We can't fight against the disease, we can't do otherwise. I am not afraid, I am indifferent. I am not courageous, but if the infection arrives, I can't run away," added Layla, whose husband died of COVID in November 2020.

Routinized actions, as well as the creation of material and symbolic thresholds, are central to the processes of home-making. Scholarly literature on homeless people, for example, goes beyond the idea of homes as spaces or places and defines them as processes, that is, the result of certain habits, objects, and rhythms (Veness 1993). What Layla did since March 2020, for instance, was aimed at protecting her loved ones:

I go to the supermarket, to the pharmacy, to protect my husband who is older. My sons are afraid, too. His age and he underwent a heart surgery. They banned

strangers in the house. I used to prepare packets [for charity] at home but my sons said no, they are afraid for their father.

Social scientists have recently called for a rereading of Mary Douglas's work to frame the responses to the pandemic (Brown 2020). In *Risk and culture: An essay on the selection of technological and environmental danger* (1982), Douglas and Aaron Wildavsky frame risk as inherently political and moral. For Egyptian women in Milan, like Nadia, age has become one of the main bases for categorizing risk.

> My parents are too old, what can we do. If something happens, I don't trust hospitals, many get COVID there. We keep them home where they are less at risk.

Home-making actions are also functional for the containment of the virus. COVID-19 has triggered a shift in what Douglas ([1966] 1976) calls the "symbolic systems of purity." The behavior we follow regarding pollution is based on a negative reaction toward any object or idea that can confuse or contradict the classifications we are used to, such as, for example, putting shoes on a table. The risk of contagion is understood by the actors as the possibility of a body—historically and culturally constructed as "pure"— being infected by the "outside," which is only superficially described as "dirty," but is in reality what is perceived "out of place." Making homes and sustaining them rests upon drawing thresholds that set inside and outside spaces and determine who is an insider and who is an outsider, instituting a sort of "domopolitics" (Bonfanti, Chen, and Massa 2022: 5). In a very similar way, Egyptian women in Milan see risk as inherent in dirt, which is incompatible with order and with inside, but also believe that individuals can dominate risk through ritual practices. As Layla related:

> From February 23 to today [May 2020] I went out five times. Also, the others. The only one who goes out more often is my son who works. He's a custodian in a delivery company [probably works in the store]. He goes Thursday evening and comes back on Saturday morning. He wears a mask, gloves, always carries hand sanitizer; when he comes back, in front of the door he takes off his shoes, he puts them in a bag, takes off his clothes and puts them in another bag, goes to the washing machine and enters the shower immediately. He's the only one who goes out. Everyday I clean my house, I clean everything, I try to throw unnecessary things away, wash my hands, I do my duty. I do

it, I am calm. If the disease arrives, what can I do? Nothing. It's not being wise, I want to find a way to calm me and others down. A little black pepper on food, it helps.

Keeping things "clean," that is "uncontaminated," increases the workload at home, together with keeping an eye on children, either pre- or school-aged.

"Children are always crying because they are at home and don't go out, kindergarten children" added Hanan.

Not to be underestimated is, also, the additional workload due to husbands who find themselves at home for longer hours in comparison to pre-pandemic times. Doha joked:

> Husbands are at home and are often scared of infections and force family members not to go out. They are afraid of going to hospitals. They are afraid of going to the market. "If we get sick, who is going to work?" My husband doesn't work, he is always stepping over my slippers [getting in my way while I do housework].

However, the pandemic has also transformed gender relations toward an increased gender balance. More Egyptian men now engaged in housework and childcare, sometimes for the first time in their life. This calls for further scrutiny and should be analyzed diachronically over the pandemic years and in the near future.

> He is at home, I go out to buy stuff, go to the market, prepare packets [for charity]. I told him "prepare stuff for lunch." He has always been passionate about cooking, I mean, it is his job. He made lunch for his kids, for the first time.

The COVID-19 pandemic has shown how essential care work is, including undervalued unpaid domestic work, which has emerged as an important function for the reproduction of society. As a structural pillar of the capitalistic organization of labor (Dalla Costa 1972: 31), unpaid care is undoubtedly a type of reciprocity which is closer to a gift than to a financial exchange, but it is also the site where labor is (re)produced, not unlike the formal economy where goods and services are produced (Bhattacharya 2017: 3). Therefore, unpaid domestic work allows us to document the reproductive labor of migrants as having the same value as waged work. Although wage labor and market relations may be among the factors that help to sustain families over time, in fact, they are not the only ones.

Care and volunteering at the time of COVID-19: *Giovani per il bene*

As Tatjana Thelen has influentially shown in *Sorge/ Care* (2014), accelerated social transformations can be privileged moments to inquire into the adoption and management of care practices, as well as the temporal, institutional, demographic, and gender-specific aspects of care. Inquiring into care and home-making practices can be a point of entry into the socioeconomic and gender-related transformations occurring during the COVID-19 pandemic, inside and outside Egyptian migrants' homes. As mentioned above, for Egyptian women, the care burden at home increased. At the same time, they committed to care practices outside their households, in the form of commitment to charity activities. During the lockdowns in Milan, some Egyptian women joined the charity organization *Giovani per il bene*, providing food and medicines to those who were in need, regardless of their nationality and faith. They thus moved care from the private to the public realm, showing how care is embedded in the processes of social reproduction, and how any division between the public sphere and the so-called "private" sphere of everyday life are largely fictive (Brickell 2012: 585).

Like the Iraqi diaspora in Germany who never got involved in politics but became active in humanitarian work (Al-Ali 2007), Egyptians, some of whom fled political persecution, and some of whom estranged themselves from social and political involvement in Egypt, became very active within the diaspora. As soon as the pandemic broke out, some Egyptians living near the first locked-down area (Soresina, where the first COVID-19 cluster was isolated) created a Facebook page[22] to share videos to explain the safety measures in Arabic. They were soon contacted by Egyptian migrants who wanted to donate face masks, food, and medicines, which were then distributed to hospitals and families in need. Progressively, on the one side, they started receiving donations from Italian citizens and other foreign nationals, and, on the other side, they organized care-recipients' lists through WhatsApp, reaching people as far south as Sicily. *Giovani per il bene*, the name of the Facebook page, became a capillary reality and attracted the attention of the media.[23] Egyptian women in Milan and Lom-

bardy participated actively, shopping for goods at the market and storing them in warehouses which were donated by some Egyptian entrepreneurs.

Egyptian women's charity work took place mainly at home, contributing to the "second shift" experienced during the pandemic. Usual home-making processes such as shopping, cooking, administrative tasks, and ritualized actions and activities, went along with the preparation of packets, meals, and with the exertion of daily actions such as making phone calls and organizing deliveries. They worked in synergy with other women, showing how the domestic sphere works for women as a socializing place, similar to the mosque for men.

Various levels of engagement emerged from the interviews, but most of them can be linked to prescribed almsgiving in Islam, the *zakat*, and to the desire to be part of the Italian imagined community, giving back what Italy has given to them. Egyptian women's engagement recalls Andrea Muehlebach's (2012: 8) concept of "ethical citizenship," a kind of relation between citizens and the state which is based on care for others and has had a long tradition in Lombardy as a substitute for a perceived absent state. Moving care out of the women's private sphere, the charity association has located it in an ethics which inhabits the public realm. The house has remained an important space where ethical subjectivity is crafted, but their activities moved ethics beyond the domestic walls. This speaks to classic feminist thinking, which encourages us to overcome too narrow a distinction between private and public spheres (Gavison 1992): for long considered to be in opposition, the private and the public spheres are thought to be carrying different gendered meanings. As a feminine space, the household and the home-making activities are often invisible to an external eye and connected to the informal economy. The charity association brought to the fore women's unpaid work, moving it outside their households and creating or strengthening a network between them. Hala, a Muslim stay-at-home mother, told us how it began:

> We cooperate, we started, we were five/six, we delivered to one hundred fifty families at the beginning. We collect money among us, the Egyptian . . . Arab community, and we buy food. At the beginning of Ramadan we delivered food for Ramadan. We cooked meals for Ramadan. A husband, one of our husbands, goes to all of us and collects meals, the woman has cooked for ten people, and brings everything to a school in Rozzano.

Egyptian women began to be recognized as political agents: Zohra, a Muslim woman, proudly said:

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22. https://www.facebook.com/GiovaniXilBene.

23. https://www.striscialanotizia.mediaset.it/video/solidarieta -multietnica-il-caso-giovani-per-il-bene_67321.shtml.

> I want to give back what I received from this country, because it is the country of my children. As long as I was at home, nobody in my son's school knew me. Now I deliver to some of his classmates, and he is proud.

Social and economic inequality, which was very visible in the intimacies of family life, came to the fore along with the efforts of families to survive and sustain themselves.

> A friend of a friend, her husband got COVID, he is in hospital. We went there to give her prepared food, we didn't know they had so many problems.

Since care practices within households operate according to a different logic than capitalism or wage labor (Gibson-Graham 2006), they serve as a safety net for individuals who have lost work during the pandemic or have always been excluded from capitalism-dominated exchanges.

As Costanzo Ranci has described, the Italian third sector may appear relatively small, if compared to other European countries, because the level of informal participation in volunteering activities and charity associations is difficult to grasp (Ranci 2001: 75). In reality, no other European country relies on volunteering activities like Italy, where "one quarter of all non-profit organizations in the country . . . [relies] exclusively on volunteers" (Ranci 2001: 76) and Italy is the only country in Europe which grants tax relief and subsidies to voluntary associations (Ranci 2001: 76). In the general climate of "outsourcing" or "externalizing" solidarity from state structures to private citizens (Muehlebach 2012: 12), migrants' charity associations have also rapidly increased.[24]

Giovani per il bene was born as a "mutual aid association," that is a self-organized reality targeting migrants as an "ethnic network," but, as stated by its members, it was open from the beginning to everybody: "we help the Human Being, not Muslims, not Christians," Ibrahim, one of its first members, told Scaglioni. Progressively, it became a humanitarian association giving essential aid (food, medicines) to all those who need it, regardless of their background. By humanitarianism here we mean a form of care, or, to quote Ticktin, a "regime of care," "a set of regulated discourses and practices grounded on . . . [the] moral imperative to relieve suffering" (Ticktin 2011: 3). In her ethnography on the humanitarian dis-

course on immigration in France, she argues that such regimes of care do not challenge the established order (Ticktin 2011:20). Similarly, humanitarian associations which were established in Italy during the pandemic, whose main aim was to slap a band-aid on an emergency situation, do not tackle the structural inequalities and the retrenchment of the state from the public health sector, identified as one of the reasons behind Lombardy's high death rate during the pandemic (Navarro 2020).

In parallel, these associations have contributed to new ideas of home and homeland among migrants, which appear to hold strong gendered meanings. By problematizing the constructedness of home, humanitarian work has made visible the work of women, usually confined to a more domestic sphere, and who, during the emergency situation, have moved across the divide between private and public. Their charity work, then, provides a fitting lens for troubling the domestic/public distinction that still implicitly structures the study of gendered labor and spaces.

Conclusion

The Egyptian communities in Milan, rather than being homogeneous entities, consist in globally mobile categories of identification, and are crosscut by internal dividing lines such as period of immigration, religion, gender, and socioeconomic level. This internal differentiation is reflected in their ideas of home, house, home country, and nationality, which mold different long-term plans, for example return, and different approaches to integration strategies in Italy.

Taking into consideration their highly gendered composition and the low female employment rates, this article makes the point that the making, remaking, and survival of the Egyptian communities in Milan are all deeply gendered processes, since they are the reflection of the role of women as reproducers in a biological as well as a cultural sense. Pivotal to the processes of familial and social reproduction are the care practices which are embedded in home-making: not only daily activities such as cooking, cleaning, and shopping, but also the mental and moral tasks connected to the survival of a family and of its values from generation to generation.

After the outbreak of the COVID-19 pandemic and the subsequent measures of lockdown, Egyptian women in Milan have seen their care burden increase at home, due also to ritualized actions aimed at avoiding risk of contagion by the SARS-CoV-2 virus. At the same time,

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24. https://www.lavoro.gov.it/notizie/Pagine/Aggiornata-la-mappatura-delle-associazioni-migranti-in-Italia.aspx.

they committed themselves to a charity association which provided care through the delivery of food and medicines to those in need, regardless of their faith and nationality. Shifting care practices to a public "outside," traditionally considered to be a masculine realm, has highlighted the political agency of Egyptian female migrants. Following bell hooks (1990), we may state that the construction of their homes has had the radical potential to transform Egyptian women into subjects, creating an autonomous space where they enact the Islamic ordinary and everyday ethics (Liebelt and Werbner 2018; Mahmood 2005). For them, the everyday is in fact constituted as a deeply gendered condition within notions of morality, ethical citizenship, and Islamic practice.

The COVID-19 pandemic, in general, has brought out the importance of homes as sites of practice and that of unpaid domestic work as a structure of social reproduction. Specifically, migrants have become protagonists in experimenting with an alternative system of welfare, one which, however, does not question the current neoliberal governmental trend regarding the public sector. Gendered and racialized forms of care are integral elements to these experiments and deserve renewed attention in times of emergency as well as beyond.

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