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Egyptian migration to Italy: “Bringing gender (and family) in”

In recent decades, gender and family have become subjects of study in the field of international migration. Studies on migration have long been blind or biased when faced with the question of gender and thus fueled the idea of women as passive followers of their husbands. From the 1980s, scholars described migration from a gender perspective and the idea that women only migrate with their husband – as shown by the recurrent expression «the migrant and his family» (Morokvasic 1984) – was subsequently widely criticized and eventually replaced by the image of a woman who takes initiative for her own migration. In an effort to highlight what the literature had previously concealed, much attention has been paid in recent decades to the experiences of first-migrant women¹.

At the same time in the last decades there has been a growing interest in the role that familial networks play in international migration. Far from being just a source for migrants to gather information and resources for their journey, the family is one of the environments in which the subjectivity of migrants is reconstructed and negotiated and it plays a role of central importance in the current paradigm for understanding international migration (Glick Schiller *et al.* 1992). The literature on transnational families describes how they are called upon to replace the idea of a static unit based on co-residence with the idea of a fluid and spatially dispersed family where relationships, mutual responsibilities and the collective sense of “familyhood” (Bryceson, Vuorela 2002: 3) are traded across borders. Interest is also catalyzed by the values that keep people connected, their conflicts, the internal hierarchies, and the practices that allow migrants to build their social personality (Grillo 2008).

Despite this growing interest, the Arab world has rarely been considered in the literature on transnational families and with a gender approach to the study of mobility². The objective of this article is to “bring gender”³ and family into the discussion of relations between Egypt and Italy. In order to do so, I will explain the reasons behind the absence of the gender and family dimensions in studies on Egyptian migration and, secondly – through data I

collected during 2010-2013 in Italy and in Egypt – I will propose an analysis that places these dimensions at the core of the discourse.

Gender and family in the study of Arab and Egyptian migration

The main cause for the scarcity of gender and family dimensions in analyses of Arab and Egyptian⁴ migration can be traced back to the lack of independent female migration from the Arab world. In the past decades attention has turned toward working women who migrate independently and assume the role of breadwinner. If married, they often live separated from their husband and children, temporarily entrusted to caregivers, usually aunts, uncles or grandparents.

Studies on the maintenance of family relationships and attachments in migration increased in the age of “feminization of migration” (Hochschild 2000) because the father who departed in order to provide for the needs of family was seen as a worthy figure, endowed with a sense of responsibility and the ability to sacrifice (Ambrosini, Abbatecola 2010: 7), while the absence of the mother affected a strongly rooted mindset – well established both in receiving and in origin countries – which connects the “nature” of women to the nurture role (Ortner 1974; MacCormack, Strathern 1980).

The increasing number of first-migrant women played a key role in catalyzing interest toward their families, with the result that there is now a large body of work on transnational mothering. Instead, transnational fatherhood has been less analyzed, despite the fact that it is an older phenomenon, definitely prevalent in certain groups such as the Egyptian one⁵.

The link between studies of first-migrant women and transnational families leads us to recognize that one of the reasons why the Arab families have been scarcely considered in this area of study is the small percentage of first-migrant women from Arab countries. Some contributions have brought to light forms of autonomous female migration

from the Maghreb countries (Salih 2003; Schmoll 2007; Ferrero 2014); nevertheless, the woman who migrates solely for the purpose of work still does not match the more common profile of migration among Arab women, in particular Egyptian.

In Italy in 2007, 94% of Egyptian women's visas were issued for family reasons⁶. Moreover, the lack of Egyptian women in the Italian labor market seems to confirm that those women move for family reasons and that their life is conducted primarily inside the home. A study carried out recently in the city of Turin comparatively analyzed the Egyptian and Moroccan communities (the two largest Arab communities in the city), confirming that this is one of the significant differences between the two groups.

In the Egyptian community women are absent in the hiring statistics, with the exception of some rare units. This depicts a very different profile from the Moroccans, where the female employment rate is higher (Ricucci 2014: 16).

Several hypotheses can be advanced to explain this difference: the first generation of Egyptians has gathered in independent employment niches, in work that appears to have been less affected by the economic crisis. If one of the effects of the economic recession was to make men's work more precarious and to increase the participation of inactive women in the labor market (Ricucci 2010), this phenomenon has not been observed in the Egyptian community. Migrant women participation in the Italian labor market is mostly concentrated in the sector of domestic works and care services and many Egyptians do not see those jobs as acceptable. They are defined as *mish naḏīf* [non clean], because they force women to come into contact with the bodies or with the dirt. A job is *naḏīf* [clean] when it is consistent with the educational background of the person and when it corresponds to a prestigious position. Accepting a job that does not fit in this category clearly shows that the woman was forced to accept it, due to straitened circumstances (Barsoum 2004: 88). In migration context the acceptable jobs are even less than in Egypt because the role of the male as breadwinner is emphasized, since it represents the reason why he left the country. Egyptian families affected by the crisis appear to have opted mainly for other types of solutions, including returning to the country of origin of some family members.

Despite the lack of an Egyptian feminization of migration, this article assumes that a gender analysis of the system of thought that has developed around the mobility experience of Egyptian women is no less necessary. In so doing, my aim is to restore a complex vision of the phenomenon and to avoid any re-emergence in migration literature

of stereotypes about the "traditional Arab family" that scholars of the Middle East are painstakingly trying to deconstruct⁸.

Methodology: following the people

Travel has always been a distinguishing trait of anthropology. In migration studies, the research in the receiving countries with people who embodied the experience of travel and distance (Clifford 1997: 105) is very often combined with the journey of the researcher who goes back to his/her informers' place of origin. "Following the people" is one of the ways to accomplish a multi-sited ethnography (Marcus 1995: 106). In my case, observing the position of women, their opinions on their husbands' migration, their experiences, and their desires meant entering into relationships with people located in the two poles of the transnational social field created by Egyptian migration.

The key sites (Emerson *et al.* 1995: 2) through which I gained access to the community were associations that work with migrants, the Egyptian school "Il Nilo"⁹, the public schools where migrants learn the Italian language and one of the local mosques¹⁰. Regularly attending those public places allowed me to build up stable relationships, which later gave me access to my informants' private spaces (all my informants' name have been changed). Egyptians living in Turin come from different parts of the country, but the most important sending locations are rural areas situated in the governorates of Monufiyya and Qalyubiyya. The reflections contained in this article apply specifically to the flow between Turin and those rural areas. I spent three summer holidays there with people who were visiting their villages or with their families¹¹. During my stay in Egypt, I spent six months living with the migrants' wives, the so-called "women left behind", exploring family organization and female discourses on migration.

In all the sites mentioned, I used the traditional qualitative methodologies that characterize an ethnographic research: interviews, life stories and participant observation. Interviews were a useful method to gain information from institutional actors and in the first stages of my work, while, in the second stages – at that time familiar with the Egyptians in Turin and especially during my stay in Egypt – I relied more on informal conversations and field notes, thanks to a growing involvement within the context.

Discourses. Male as mobile gender vs. female as immobile gender

In Egypt the perception of migration as a male activity is connected to practices that have characterized much of the internal mobility (Ibrahim 1982; Zohry 2002), as well as the migration toward the Gulf countries (Amin – Awny 1985) and, more recently to Europe. The policy of liberalization begun by Sadat in the mid-1970s coincided with the economic boom in the oil-producing countries. This led to a mass migration to the Gulf countries¹² and since then the profile of migrants corresponded largely to that of a married man, though not accompanied by his wife (Louhichi 1997: 324)¹³. This mass mobility is what Ghosh described in his book *The Imam and the Indian* when he says that «every men [in the village] was a traveler». In the preface of *Routes, Travel and Translation in the Late Twentieth Century*, Clifford reflects on the fact that Ghosh drew attention to a specific male experience of worldliness that is the norm in the Egyptian villages affected by migration. But Clifford continues: «When travel [...] becomes a kind of norm, dwelling demands explications. Why, with what degrees of freedom, do people stay home?» (Clifford 1997: 5). The fact that migration to the Gulf countries remained almost a totally male experience¹⁴ structured the phenomenon of the so-called “women left behind”, which reached a particularly relevant dimension in rural Egypt¹⁵.

It is known that access to mobility – which for Bauman is one of the major elements of social stratification in the modern world (Bauman 1998: 8) – is influenced by gender. To this regard, the local “culture of migration”¹⁶ defines a system of thought in which the experiences of mobility and the understanding of migration are radically affected by gender, and the boundary that determines the difference between a “potential migrant” and a “non-potential migrant” overlaps completely with the gender division. The rigid distinction of roles implies that men can be imagined (and imagine themselves) as migrants and women cannot (Ferrero *fc*).

Women are part of this system of thought and they are normally keen to present themselves as followers of their husbands. When asked to explain the reason for “women’s immobility”, they primarily refer to local customs and traditions (*‘ādāt wa-taqālīd*). In the Egyptian “culture of migration” the *‘ādāt wa-taqālīd* are supported by religious elements and the more explicit reference is a *ḥadīth* (a saying attributed to the prophet Muhammad) that many people cite when addressing this topic¹⁷. Thus women and men attribute religious motives to the absence of women’s autonomous movement

stressing a line of continuity between the teachings of the prophet and Egyptian traditions. This is an important step, given that Islam is the highest reference from the moral point of view (Abu Lughod 1986). When asked why other Muslim countries have a slightly different pattern of migrations, one of my informants declared that the absence of women’s autonomous migration from Egypt proves that «Egyptians are closer to Islam than other Arabs».

Another element mentioned is the law: in November 2000, the High Constitutional Court established the right of women to leave the country without their husband’s consent, in a break with the code of 1985 that prevented women from traveling without the written permission of their husband or father¹⁸. The duty of a woman to ask her husband for consent recalled a system of mutual obligation within the couple that assigned husbands the legal obligation to support his wife and children, and wives to obey (Sonneveld 2012). At the time of the law’s enactment, the attention of the media and public opinion focused on the novelty that the law introduced with regard to divorce, shifting the emphasis from the articles about women mobility. The consistency of the previous law with religious precepts, furthermore, may have helped to cushion the potential change inscribed in the legislation, as in the case of Zeinab. I met her in Italy immediately after she divorced, she was employed as a domestic worker and she was living with her daughter and son. The summer after she get divorced she wanted to visit Egypt but she postponed the trip because she was afraid that her former husband could prevent her from returning. She was already officially divorced in Italy, but the translation of the documents was still ongoing in Egypt, and she said:

A woman cannot leave the country without the permission of her husband. Formally, we are still married and if I go to Egypt he will immediately know where I am and eventually prevent me to come back to Italy. I feel safer here, I will go next year (Zeinab, 03/05/2011, Turin).

The Egyptian migration practice and interpretative discourse that emerge create a dichotomy between the image of a “mobile” man – entitled to act in the transnational sphere – and an “immobile” woman. Over the last fifteen years – following the establishment of the Egyptian communities in Europe – the percentage of women living outside the country increased thanks to the institution of family reunification¹⁹. The emergence of this form of mobility has not yet produced significant reflections on the presence of Egyptian women abroad. Despite the fact that their presence exceeds 30% of

the communities in Italy and France (Zohry 2009) the literature continues to describe Egyptian women as averse toward migration (IOM 2011), mostly because their profile is characterized by holding a visa for family reasons (Sika 2011). These positions bring to the transnational arena the contrast between the public and private spheres in which explanations of the gender roles in Arab and Muslim societies are often rooted, but whose lack of epistemological validity has been discussed for decades in the social sciences²⁰.

Practices. Multiple meanings of marrying a migrant

When I entered Mosaab's house, in a village of Qalyubiyya, he told me that without his work in Italy he would not have been able to build his own flat²¹. Since the period of the mass migration to the Gulf, migration became one of the fastest ways to collect the money necessary for a marriage (Weyland 1993) and this is even truer today because of the rising price of the *shabka*²² (Singerman, Ibrahim 2003: 83).

Transnational marriages are widespread between Egyptians, as well as in other migrant communities, since young men who depart unmarried usually after a few years take part in weddings organized with a young woman from the same village. The literature focuses on the point of view of the migrants stressing that they normally prefer transnational marriages because they consider them more durable and stable than "love marriages" and because they reinforce kinship ties, cultural norms, and identity (Kraler *et al.* 2011: 28). Here, I would like to shed light on the point of view of the girls who undertake this kind of marriage. Weyland counterpoises a marriage with a migrant with what in Egypt is defined as a marriage *'ayy kalām*, or "normal" (Weyland 1993: 151): in a society in which the marriage is one of the ways to achieve social mobility and to increase the social capital of the family (Bourdieu 1972) – besides being a social event aimed at creating a safe environment for women and a suitable context for reproduction – the marriage with a migrant is seen as a good option. Marriage is also regarded as a financial investment and the choice of marrying a migrant can, therefore, be justified both economically as well as culturally. This is confirmed by those families in which this marriage strategy is repeated, either in the same or in different generations: Meriem is the widow of a man who used to work in Italy and her daughter got engaged to a man who runs a shop in Turin. Meriem is reproducing her experience – judged as a positive one – for

her daughter because she wants her to maintain the same economical level (De Haas, Van Rooij 2010: 56). In rural Egypt it is now common for a young woman and her family to refuse marriage proposals from men living in Egypt in order to wait for the summer – the period in which most of the young men living in Italy return to their home country for their holidays – hoping to arrange a more "convenient" marriage.

From the women's point of view, I refer to this union as a "marriage with an absentee" to stress the fact that it is undertaken with someone living elsewhere (Ferrero 2015). The girls express several reasons to prefer a marriage with a migrant: while some of them accept under the pressure of the family, many are willing to receive a proposal from someone who is living abroad. Highly educated girls, for example, want to avoid working in the countryside as many of their mothers did and conceive of marriage with a migrant as a way to escape those duties. Some are attracted by men who have experienced the life abroad and can provide them with the same experience and for this reason some accept the marriage proposal only if the husband agrees to let them join him right after the wedding. It is known that migrants' returns and their stories have a strong impact on those left behind and encourage other potential migrants to plan a departure. If this impact encourages some young men to imagine themselves as "potential migrants", at the same time it acts on young women by inspiring some of them to imagine themselves as "potential wives of migrants". Choosing to marry a migrant is not only accepted but could possibly be desired in order to achieve economic security, a higher social status, and, especially for women from rural backgrounds, the only opportunity for migrating without breaking the social norms and cultural requirements. When Nura told me the story of her sister she addressed this point very clearly:

She had received other engagement proposal before, but she never agreed. She was willing to leave Egypt, so when Khalil came she immediately accepted because he was living in Italy (Nura, 14/3/2012, Turin).

This quotation, together with the words of another woman who said «I would never have accepted his request to marry me if I was not willing to come to Italy», emphasises that not only women's mobility but also women's aspirations to mobility has to be considered within the family framework. Mobility is conceived of only through the family and especially through marriage; however, this does not mean that women do not want to migrate. In

patrilocal societies, marriage has always been the first reason for women's mobility (Palriwala, Uberoi 2008: 28), and the marriage with a migrant reminds us that when the union is transnational the analysis of the marriage choice has to include the expectations of the girl regarding mobility. Reunited women are often excluded from consideration in migration studies – if not as a way to reproduce foreign communities abroad – hiding the fact that in many societies across the globe, marriages can be an efficient and socially accepted means of achieving international mobility.

Gendering the experience of the arrival

Whether they are young unmarried or married men, for most of the men the arrival and the settlement is mediated by social networks associated with "Egyptian" and "male" identity. Shared houses, local mosques, and workplaces shape a male-dominated geography which is the location for both mutual support and mutual control (Gruntz, Pages El-Karoui 2013: 75). I argue that this "all male world" (Saad 2007: 11) is part of the experience that enforces the discourse that describes men as the mobile part of the society and women as the immobile part. Some authors stated that the high number of men abroad leads to the "feminization of the Egyptian family" (Hoodfar 1996), I would rather describe it as the "feminization of the house" (Peleikis 2003: 125) or of the "home country". For unmarried migrants – who eventually meet male members of the family in Italy – Egypt is the place where the female part of the family stays behind and the place where most of them go when they want to look for a bride (Ferrero 2015).

The reunion of the family normally represents a big change in the life of both partners because it coincides with the establishment of a nuclear household in the arrival country and with a change in the relations within the community. Men cohabit in houses with other compatriots until they reunite their family, and a woman's arrival is mediated mostly by her husband. As King and his colleagues affirm, migration destabilizes notions of household and family (King *et al.* 2006: 260) and this is in part due to what norms that govern familiar reunion recognize as "a family". Since the nuclear family is the only type recognized for purposes of immigration (Bryceson, Vuorela 2002: 130), the arrival of the woman in Italy represents the first experience of a nuclear household (Favaro, Tognetti Bordogna 1991: 142) and for someone – especially those who had a transnational marriage – also the first period of cohabitation after the marriage celebrated in

Egypt. It is important to note that women normally come from extended families and that for many of them the migration is the first travel out of Egypt, in addition to being a change from a rural to an urban setting.

I met Nagla the first time in Egypt and then again in Turin, when she joined her husband. This allowed me to observe the delicate stage of the settlement in the new city. When I visited her – one month after she came to Italy – I realized that she never left the house alone. Since she is a young and educated woman, I tried to convince her to attend Italian classes but she told me that her husband did not want her to leave the house alone. He is normally out the whole day and they go out together on Saturday to do the shopping. She totally understands her husband's prohibition, because she does not speak any Italian and she still feels lost in the city. When I asked her why she did not rely on other people from the same village she mentioned two reasons: the first one is that all the people she knows are from her husband's family and she is not very close to them and the second reason is that:

In Italy relations between family members is not like in Egypt. Everyone is busy with his own life and they are not as close as they are in Egypt (Nagla, 26/03/2013, Turin).

Even if many Egyptians come from the same areas and they are connected by family relationships, it is rare that they reproduce the same proximity in the receiving country. While in Egypt, relations with members of the same community and of the extended family is taken for granted as part of the everyday life – and that do not require specific places or moments to take place – in Turin it is necessary to plan them and they become a "functional" experience more than a "natural" one (De Bernart 1995: 136).

The change of country and setting, the absence of extended family networks, the weakness of the relations with the members of the family who live in Turin, the tendency of the husbands to be less permissive in the first period after the marriage (MacLeod 1991: 71) partially explain why in the women's accounts the arrival is often associated with feelings of loss and loneliness, especially for young wives without children²³.

Within and beyond the domestic realm

Even women who are now very active, who speak a good level of Italian language and are in contact with the civil society, told me about a first period of isolation. Those accounts have to be contextualized

not only in the context of the big change represented by the migration, but also in the context of the life stages of a woman. I rely on Kandiyoti's reflections (1988) that made clear that social roles change not only as a consequence of the individual's action but also because the social system attribute specific roles to certain people in different moments of their lives. As a consequence, women's roles need to be observed via a "life cycle approach" that take into account the changes of power that normally occur when a woman gets older.

In Egypt, like in other patriarchal contexts, the position of a woman varies according to her life stage. Khattab and El Daeif (1982) described how the life stage influences her position within the family, in a way that is still close to what happens today in rural areas: after marriage, the young woman is incorporated into her husband's family and she is subordinated to the members of that family, in particular to the control of her mother-in-law. Her status improves after the birth of her first child and gets better when her daughters start to help her in the daily tasks. The marriage of her sons marks her entrance into the last stage of the family life, when she will become the head of a new extended family.

Following the insights that show the importance of a life cycle approach to the study of family life (Goody 1958), I would like to describe some steps that marked changes in the life of the Egyptian women I met in Italy. Egyptian migration has not concluded the "migratory cycle" yet (Cingolani, Ricucci 2013), but it is necessary to transcend the descriptions of the hardship of the first period in order to observe the path that brings Egyptian women inside the new society and to show some possible ways for going beyond the domestic realm in the analysis of their experiences.

A first step for them is normally attending places recognized as part of the Egyptian or the Islamic community, like the Egyptian school or the mosque. These are perceived of as "safe" places and for this reason even in case of strict husbands, women are allowed to attend them. As their children grow up, all migrant women are normally pushed toward to the Italian society because they start to attend social services (like schools and hospitals for example)²⁴ and other gathering places. The relationship with the children plays an important role in the integration of the Egyptian women into Italian society because women define themselves and their presence abroad in relation to their families (MacLeod 1991: 48; Joseph 1999) and sometimes, for this reason, sometimes they also perceive themselves in opposition to Western women, who they see as too much oriented toward work (El Solh, Mabro 1994: 16-18). In migration – because of the lack of support

of the extended family – this role is empathized and women consider themselves as the "pillars of the family" (Marranci 2007: 86) because the education of the children is privatized and nuclearized:

Women who live abroad face a lot of problems, especially with the children, so we became stronger. Our husbands work a lot and we don't have anyone else to help us, so we educate our sons and daughters by ourselves. Religious education, for example, in Egypt is present everywhere: in the school, in the family, in the mosques. Here we have to deal with this alone, and it's not easy. I think we are strong because we get used to doing everything by ourselves (Ferial, 27/5/2011, Turin).

Domestic practices shape the everyday life of the women; in Italy, where there is no extended family and where the rhythm of the men's lives makes it more difficult for them to follow an Islamic conduct (Killian 2006: 113), women take the responsibility for the children's education and for the social-religious identity of the family (Salih 2003: 71). As many women said the most difficult part is to keep their children away from what they consider dangerous from a moral point of view, while trying to give them, at the same time, an education that will prepare them ready to live in a Western society (Haddad *et al.* 2006: 14)²⁵. This role is what pushed two groups of women to organize activities for their children in a local mosque²⁶. In the migration context, the mosque has a meaning that goes beyond the religious and the spiritual one, since it takes on cultural and social values. In order to transmit religious education and to facilitate the study of the Arabic language, women organized weekly gatherings for their children. The interesting thing is that this task made the mosque an important meeting point for the women themselves, pushing them afterwards to organize activities for themselves. For a period of at least two years, women used to gather in the mosque for several reasons: while some of them were interested in taking religious classes (Mahmood 2004), others were more attracted by the Italian classes and other activities organized with the help of an Italian association based close to the mosque (Ferrero 2014).

What emerges from the reflection on the "domestic role" of the Egyptian women is that their role in raising and educating their children contributes to describing women in a more complex way. The difficult task (this is how they perceived it) that they take on in educating their children in a foreign society, pushes those women to reflect on their own values, on their religion, on their role, and it becomes one of the most important ways through

which they communicate with the "external world", the Italian society, the Egyptian community, and the Islamic Ummah. Through their empowering experience (to use the words of Ferial), women can start to give a new meaning to that nuclear house that in the early stages of their arrival meant loneliness and loss. Women start to talk about freedom and autonomy, and this mostly happens when they find their own way "beyond the domestic realm", meaning that they become autonomous in their movements, able to communicate in Italian, are active in their community and some of them – even if a small number – start to work. A moment in which this change of perspective becomes clear is during the summer return, when women are included again in their husbands' houses (Gardner 2002: 139). Sometimes there are discussions because women prefer to stay with their families, while it is socially more acceptable that they stay in their husband's house, where most of them have their apartment. This experience is particularly strong for those women who left Egypt immediately after their marriage, without being socialized in the everyday life of the husband's extended family (Salih 2002: 61).

Conclusion

In my analysis I took inspiration from theories of gender that describe migration at the same time as a gendered (influenced by gender) and a gendering phenomenon (Hondagneu-Sotelo 2000). Migration contributes to the creation of gender roles that can represent an alternative to the existing ones, but gender distinctions can also be reinvented to create hierarchies that are even more rigid than in the homeland (Caglar 1995; Espiritu 1992). Even if in the Egyptian case the migration experience reinforces the connection between male/mobility and female/immobility, my main point is that an analysis of the mobility experience of Egyptian women is no less necessary.

Analyzing woman as the non-migrant part of the family, the literature on migration from Arab countries considers the psychological impact that remittances have on men without analyzing what effect they have on women, as if women were less influenced by imagining other lifestyles and Egyptian women continue to be described as wives who follow their husbands without considering that female ambitions of mobility in a country like Egypt can be expressed in accordance with the roles assigned to women by their society. I argue that it is not possible to speak of ambitions for female migration in the abstract, without bringing these ambitions into the sphere that legitimizes them, and social scientific

attention to the intersection of marriage and migration should take into account women's desires toward marrying a migrant as part of their fantasies of identities (Moore 1994: 50) and eventually fantasies of mobility (Pinelli 2011).

In addition to this, it is fundamental to go beyond the arrival in the host society to show how the family balance is constructed and maintained in the receiving context through the life cycle of the family. The new living arrangement, which allows women to experience for the first time in their life a nuclear family, brings changes to the everyday life and to the relations between the women and their children. As discussed by Ruba Salih, the migrants' "home"²⁷ is made up of two places that provide different but complementary resources to build their social personality (2003: 81). In the case of the Egyptian women I met in Italy, the house in Italy and the house in Egypt are connected to different values of the social life: the house in Egypt is the place of collectivity and the house in Italy is the place of autonomy. Many discourses I have heard are developed in the space of this ambivalence. One of the consequences of the everyday experience in Italy is the development of an idea of privacy that is new for most of the women. The process is ambivalent because it brings both experiences that are seen as positive (independence), as well as effects that are seen as negative (loneliness). Migration allows women to make experience of a nuclear arrangement in an early stage of their conjugal life and some of the consequences are visible in the experience of women who experienced a family breakdown in the context of arrival (as divorce or widowhood). None of these women departed alone, but some of them – like Zeinab who experienced divorce in Italy – are living by themselves, refusing the idea of going back to Egypt and creating forms of female-headed households in the arrival context (Ferrero *fc.*). This shows that through life experiences abroad reunited women can attribute a new meaning to their own experience of mobility that does not necessarily depend on their husbands. Family migration, therefore, does not mean an absence of mobility ambition, migratory thoughts, reflection on one's own role as a woman abroad, and consequences on the way to perceive the family life and the country of origin.

Notes

¹ See between others: Hondagneu-Sotelo, Avila (1997); Hochschild (2000); Ehrenreich, Hochschild (2002); Parreñas (2001; 2005); George (2005); Hondagneu-Sotelo (2007). The literature about first migrant women increased in the two last decades, but the phenomenon itself is older. In particular, migrant working women were already present in Italy in the '70s and '80s; they were mostly coming from Capo Verde, Philippine and El Salvador and were working in the care sector (Favaro, Tognetti Bordogna 1991; Favaro, Omenetto 1993).

² For exceptions see Peleikis (2003) for the case of Lebanon, Salih (2003) and Schmoll (2007) for Morocco.

³ This expression – also used in the title – refers to the article by Pessar and Mahler (2003) «Transnational migration: Bringing gender in», where the authors encourage a deeper study of the gender dimension in analyses of transnationalism.

⁴ One exception in the Italian context is Ambrosini, Schellembaum (1994).

⁵ For analyses on other groups, see: Osella, Osella (2000); Dreby (2006); Kilkey *et al.* (2014), Della Puppa (2014).

⁶ Source: www.demo.istat.it.

⁷ In this article both Standard Arabic and Egyptian Arabic terms are used. I adopt the IJMES transliteration system. For the Egyptian Arabic I refer to Hinds, Badawi (1986).

⁸ See for example the collective volumes edited by Hopkins (2003) and Joseph, Riecker (2010).

⁹ The Egyptian school “Il Nilo” has been founded in 1995. It offers lesson during the week-end according to the programs of the Egyptian Ministry of Education, and provides the children with Egyptian certificates.

¹⁰ In Turin there are several mosques. I used to attend the weekly gathering in the one which is characterized by the higher participation of Egyptian believers.

¹¹ I used a transnational methodology with a “matched sample” that means that the multi-sited study has been conducted in different places with members of the same families or social networks (Mazzucato 2009).

¹² In 1983, 20% of the Egyptian workforce worked in the Gulf countries, Iraq, and Libya (Winckler 1999: 107).

¹³ The only workers that could easily plan a family reunification were civil servants, while for others a series of obstacles – among these the difficulty of achieving civil rights, average earnings too low to maintain a family and foreign worker visas that did not permit a request for reunification (Zohry 2006) – made it impossible to organize the movement of their family.

¹⁴ Forms of female migration, however, have not been entirely absent: among women the predominant profile was that of high-skilled and married women who migrated since the 1980s (Abdel Jawad 1984, cited in Amin, Awny 1985; Sika 2011), whereas in the 2000s, working-class single or divorced women departed as well due to the precariousness of job opportunities (Cantini, Gruntz 2010).

¹⁵ The phenomenon gained wide attention in Egypt, because of its numerical dimensions (Taylor 1984; Khafagy 1984; Brink 1991; Louhichi 1997; Zohry 2006; Hafez *et al.* 2010; Binzel, Assaad 2011; Abdelaal 2011). In this paper, I do not describe this category of women, but some reflections from my research are contained in Ferrero (2015). For studies in other geographical areas see: Day, Icdygu (1997) on Turkey, De Hass *et al.* (2010) on Morocco, King *et al.* (2006) on Albania, Myntti (1984) on Yemen, Hampshire (2006) on Burkina Faso.

¹⁶ By “culture of migration” Cohen (2004) means that in certain contexts migration is pervasive, that the decision to migrate is part of their everyday experience and is accepted by the community as a path towards economic well-being.

¹⁷ «The prophet said: “It is not permissible for a woman to stay in a country that is not hers for more than three days without the company of a *mahram*”» The *mahram* is a man with whom the woman cannot contract a marriage bond (her father, brother, or son) and who can be considered responsible for her. In the collection of *hadith* of al-Bukhari, one of the most accredited in Sunni Islam, this saying appears more than once, reported by different sources.

¹⁸ This openness with respect to previous laws appears in Law 1/2000, The Law on Reorganization of Certain Terms and Procedures of Litigation in Personal Status Matters, which became famous as the “*kbul'* law” named after unilateral divorce (*kbul'*), the most significant innovation introduced by the law (Sonneveld 2012).

¹⁹ To compare with other experiences of familiar reunification carried out by migrant men in the Italian context, see: Balsamo (1997) for the analysis of Moroccan reunited families; Tognetti Bordogna (2011) for the analysis of Moroccan, Pakistani and Indian families and Della Puppa (2014) for the analysis of families from Bangladesh.

²⁰ Criticism of a description of Middle Eastern societies based on a strict distinction between the public and private spheres has been a recurring theme in the literature of feminist anthropologists who have worked in the area since the 1970s (Nelson 1974; Abu Lughod 1986).

²¹ When building a house in the country of origin, migrants mostly build a new apartment on a floor added to the *bēt il-'ā'ila*. *Bēt* means house, and *il-'ā'ila* means patrilineal lineage. The expression can be translated as "family home" and indicates buildings which host a set of parents with sons and their families.

²² Amount of gold given to the future bride in the day of the engagement party.

²³ Loneliness and nostalgia of the extended family, especially of the mother and sisters, characterized the experience of most of the reunited women. For studies in Italy, see Bargellini (1993); Balsamo (1997); Balsamo (2003) and Cattaneo, dal Verme (2005).

²⁴ This is one of the reasons for which the first studies on families and women in Italy focused on the women's use of the services: Favaro, Tognetti Bordogna (1991); Balsamo (1997; 2003) and Cattaneo, dal Verme (2005).

²⁵ For their educative role, women have been described as "bridges between cultures" Favaro, Tognetti Bordogna (1991); Favaro, Omenetto (1993).

²⁶ Those activities were held in the period in which I was conducting my fieldwork (2011-2013). After that, the political tension that aroused in Egypt created problems within the community and partially caused the end of those activities.

²⁷ The concept of "home" in migration studies is complex because it brings together the feeling of belonging to the home country and the idea of being integrated in a new context. The word "home" refers both to a physical space and to a symbolic meaning (Rapport, Dawson 1998; Al-Ali, Koser 2002).

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