

**Islam, Gender and Transnational Belongings: Narratives of
Young Muslim Women of Egyptian Origin in Italy**

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Abstract

The paper explores the multiple identities constructions of young Muslim women of Egyptian origin who were born and/or grew up in Italy. Using an intersectional approach, the work analyzes three central aspects of identity reference points for children of migration, including the relationship with their parents' country of origin, Egypt; the substantial sense of belonging (through formal and informal citizenship) to Italy; and the feeling of being part of a transnational Islamic *umma* (community) with specific European features.

Keywords: Islam, youth, women, children of migration, Egypt, Italy

1. Introduction. An intersectional approach to study the multiple belongings of young Muslim women in Italy

This study explores the multiple identities constructions of young Muslim women of Egyptian origin who were born and/or grew up in Rome¹.

Using an intersectional approach, the work analyzes three central aspects of identity reference points for children of migration, commonly called ‘second generation’ in Italy², (Ambrosini 2004; Colombo 2010; Granata 2011), including the relationship with their parents’ country of origin (Egypt), the relationship with the country where they were born/grew up (Italy), and religious identification (Islam).

The analysis of the identities of young Muslim women presented here places the religious dimension in relationship to a variety of other aspects that make up their identities.

First of all, this study keeps in consideration that gender, biological sex, and sexual orientation are decisive factors in differentiating the ways in which religion is experienced. Socialization based on the principles of Islam, how it is transmitted, and how it is practiced privately and publicly differs for girls and boys.

Secondly, we see the inherited/experienced/reinvented/rejected religious dimension as an aspect making up the individual biographies that can only be understood if placed within evolving processes.

1 This paper is based on the results of a research funded by the “Forum per i Problemi della Pace e della Guerra” and coordinated by the University of Florence. It is part of a broader and comparative project on “second generation” young Muslim women in Italy and gender citizenship. The analysis of the first part of this research project based on interviews with young women of bengali and moroccan origins was published in the following essay: Pepicelli, R. (2015), “Dall’Islam delle madri all’Islam delle figlie. Giovani musulmane tra agency e intersezionalità nella città di Roma”, in Acocella I. e Pepicelli R. (a cura di), *Giovani musulmane in Italia. Percorsi biografici e pratiche quotidiane*, Bologna, Il Mulino, pp. 61–94.

2 In Italy, opinion is not unanimous on the terminology to refer to the young children of migrant parents. “Second generation” is the expression most commonly used, also by some young people for self-representation in public debate. Consider, for example, the network “G2-Seconde Generazioni”. However, this term does not seem to fully reflect the complexity of the phenomenon, as it risks emphasizing the migratory experience as an indelible feature of the biographies, without considering that some youth were born in Italy and, therefore, never emigrated from any country. Here, preference has been given to the expression “sons and daughters of migrations” to indicate, on the one hand, the migratory experience their parents underwent and transmitted and, on the other, to underline how the migration process is in constant flux and has not necessarily been concluded, being able to produce new migrations and movements towards other parts of the world in the future.

The relationship with religion is not a condition given once and for all in a single way. Youth, as also older people, move through plural routes that are not one-directional, but are Islamized, de-Islamized, and re-Islamized (Khosrokhavar 1997) in relationship to aspects of their individual biographies (meetings, inclusions, exclusions, traumas, joys, etc.) and external events at the community level, not directly connected to them, but that lead them to question dimensions of their identities³.

In Italy, and the rest of Europe, given the re-Islamization of discourses, practices and public and private spaces, young women—and young men—who were born and/or raised in Muslim families emigrated to Italy, interact in a plural way (Barbagli e Schmoll 2011; Pacini 2005; Ricucci 2014; Saint-Blancat 2004); while there is a growing number of young women who react to this with active involvement, there are also those who react with conflictual reactions, in which the religious factor is marginalized, if not excluded, and original syncretisms are enacted to create hybrid forms.

Positions and identities should not be considered fixed, but rather placed within dynamic, constantly evolving relationships that remove individuals from the reductionism of monolithic categories, which would set individuals in fixed identities, blind to the individualities and subjectivities of their experiences (Perilli and Ellena 2012).

From this perspective, the theory of intersectionality (Crenshaw 1989; Marchetti 2013) is very useful, as this analytical approach sheds light on the multiple, simultaneous nature of systems of domination, and the interdependence of the different categories of identity in individuals' multi-positionality.

The paper is based on observant participation and ten in-depth interviews with young women of Egyptian origin of Muslim religion between 16 and 24 years old⁴.

All with Italian citizenship, they were born in Italy or came when they were very young. These young women come from different neighborhoods in Rome and are lower middle class. They are daughters of parents with similar migration stories, with the father

3 Consider the effects of the September 11 attacks on the identity construction of many Muslims, who were pushed to express loyalty to only one of their identities, either the Muslim one or the Western one.

4 The interviews were conducted between June and October 2015. The young women are identified with pseudonyms.

coming to Italy earlier followed by the mother later. They are mid-sized families with two or three children, most of whose mothers are housewives, and whose fathers work mainly in food service and retail.

The interviewees are secondary school students—mainly enrolled in Italian lyceum secondary schools with a focus on languages, science or art—and universities, studying political science, law, engineering, pharmaceutical, and languages, with a single case of an unemployed twenty-three-year-old woman. All consider themselves practicing Muslims, though to different degrees and with different nuances. Many participate or have participated in youth associations with a religious orientation.

2. The Egyptian community in Italy: statistics, qualities and trajectories

The community factor is not a neutral factor in shaping identity definitions of children of migrations. As such, it is worth briefly considering a few aspects of the Egyptian community in Italy⁵.

The Egyptian community in Italy is currently the eighth largest community of non-EU citizens legally residing in Italy; on January 1, 2014, immigrants of Egyptian origin counted 135,284, accounting for 3.5% of the total of non-EU citizens in Italy. Their presence has gradually increased in recent years, going from 2.7% in 2008 to 3.5% in 2013. One of the primary traits of this community is the clear prevalence of men, who number 95,000, accounting for 70.5% of the total; there are approximately 40,000 women for the remaining 29.5%. This large gender imbalance seems to be a testament to a lack of job security and economic stability, factors that make it possible to start the family reunification process.

With regard to geographical distribution, more than four out of five Egyptian citizens live in North Italy (81% of the total), predominantly in the region of Lombardy (67.8% of the total). Lombardy is followed by the following regions, in order of Egyptian popu-

⁵ The source for the data in this paragraph is from the report “La Comunità Egiziana in Italia – 2013”; http://www.integrazionemigranti.gov.it/Attualita/IIIPunto/Documents/rapporti_comunita_2014/rapporti%20integrati/ComunitaEgiziana.pdf

lation: Lazio (14.1%), Emilia Romagna (5.7%) and Piedmont (4.1%), with a concentration in large metropolitan areas (such as Milan and Rome).

In terms of employment, 57.8% of Egyptian workers are employed in the tertiary sector. A particular specialization of the Egyptian community emerges in jobs related to the “hotel and restaurant” industry, which employs 28.2% of Egyptian workers. The industrial sector employs 40.8% of workers from this community. The construction industry employs 23.3% of Egyptian workers, and 12.5% in heavy industry. It is an important point that Egyptian workers mostly have medium-high education levels; 56.2% of community members have a second-level high school education (36.6%) or university education (19.5%). It is noteworthy that participation in the labor market primarily regards the male members of the community. There is an unemployment level of about 9% among women, and an inactivity level of around 85%.

Egyptian immigration in Italy is predominantly male and generally young; 50.1% of Egyptians citizens legally residing in Italy are under 30 years old, with a high proportion of minors within the community, accounting for 31.7% of the total.

If we look more in depth at the child and youth population, with particular focus on the gender component—a focus of this study—we note that there is a more balanced gender ratio among children, with 23,760 males and 19,088 females, with the female percentage rising to 44.5% (compared to the above-mentioned 29% among Egyptian citizens as a whole).

Considering the rates and forms of education, there were 15,239 students of Egyptian origin in the Italian school system in the school year 2013/2014, accounting for 2.5% of the non-EU school community. In 2013 there were 659 Egyptian students enrolled in university, accounting for 1.2% of the total of non-EU university students. The percentage of women within the Egyptian school population is higher at lower levels (46% both in nursery school and elementary school). At higher academic levels, their percentage gradually decreases (42% in first-level secondary school and 33% in second-level secondary school). The gender distribution of students from the Egyptian community enrolled in the different sections of second-level secondary school has a strong prevalence of women in the fields of training colleges. For the male segment of the Egyptian community, we see an accentuated preference for technical/trade education. The phe-

nomenon of young people who do not work, do not study, and are not in training, termed NEETs (*Not in Employment, Education and Training*), has long been the focus of discussion about young generations in Europe, not excluding young foreigners, or children of foreigners in Italy. There are 7,709 young people between 15 and 29 years old in the Egyptian community who do not study and do not work, accounting for 2.8% of NEETs of non-EU origin.

The economic crisis that exploded in 2008 has dramatically worsened the perception of foreigners and their descendants in Italy, as well as the living conditions of many foreign families and many young people. Statistics show that, between 2008 and 2013, the unemployment rate for the Egyptian community increased by over 11 percentage points, from 10.3% to 21.9%⁶. In recent years, many of the fathers of the young women interviewed, and some of the few mothers who work (as mentioned, women in the community are mainly housewives and do not work outside of the home) found themselves unemployed, having to close businesses, and experiencing exclusion from the job market and job insecurity.

My father has been here for 35 years. After you lose your job, you feel left out in the cold. You think, 'I left my country to give my family a future and this future is not certain, whether or not you'll manage to recover [...]. You feel the recession more when you're a foreigner or an Italian with a foreign name, because you hear people saying, 'Let's give Italians work first and then the others. Why should they steal our jobs?' And then you think, I've worked alongside you for 35 years, and I've always paid taxes and contributions just like you (Fatima, 21).

Given the economic difficulties faced by their families, some of the young women interviewed, though deeply rooted in Italy, were considering the idea of migrating in the near future. Though they are generally looking more towards other European countries,

⁶ During the same period of time, the unemployment rate of Italians rose from 6.6% to 11.5%, and that of the non-EU community as a whole from 8.8% to 18%. In light of this evidence, we can say that the Egyptian community was significantly affected in terms of employment by the economic crisis, especially regarding the increase in absolute and percentage terms of the number of unemployed. See the above-mentioned report "La Comunità Egiziana in Italia — 2013".

there are some thinking that Egypt may give them employment opportunities, especially those who grew up abroad, and have foreign school diplomas and university degrees.

I always thought that I would never leave Rome, which is my city, but now I think that there isn't much future here. I also think that about the rest of Europe. There is no certainty anywhere. I think maybe I would like to go back to my country. I had never considered it an opportunity, but, actually, why not? It is changing now and it's sure to improve over time. I can see now the situation in which the country is. Italy is declining, and you start to look around and see where to go (Fatima, 21).

Now I don't know whether to do a degree course in cooperation and development at the university here, or to move to Egypt and study Arabic⁷, see if I can find a job there. I dream of teaching Italian at the Italian Embassy to children of Italians who live there (Saida, 24).

2.1 Roots and multiple identity belongings: the Arab umma, the Egyptian nation, the Italian citizenship

The young women of Egyptian origin interviewed described a very strong identity connection to their parents' country of origin. This can be likely related to the history of Egyptian nationalism. Since before independence, and all the more afterwards, the Egyptian people have tended towards strong national and pan-Arab pride.⁸

The hopes fueled by the January 25, 2011 revolution revived a number of identity and nationalism processes, including among young people in the diaspora, at least for the first years after the fall of Mubarak.⁹ In the wake of protests, which were the focus of major media attention worldwide, young people born and/or raised abroad started to

7 Though many of the young women interviewed speak Egyptian, they have difficulty reading and writing in Arabic. Though in some families, the children studied classical Arabic (mostly through courses organized at the mosque on weekends), and some have even followed the study program of Egyptian schools since middle school, taking an exam every year to be able to obtain Egyptian school diplomas, parallel to the Italian ones, many of the young women are only able to speak the Egyptian dialect.

8 On Arab nationalism and Egyptian nationalism in particular see Tibi B. (1996), *Arab Nationalism. Between Islam and the Nation-State*, Palgrave, Hampshire.

9 For a reconstruction of the revolution in Egypt, see Gervasio G., Teti A. (2013), *I Fratelli musulmani e la rivoluzione di gennaio: fra tentazione egemonica e neautoritarismo* in Campanini M., *Le rivolte arabe e l'Islam. La transizione incompiuta*, Bologna, Il Mulino.

give more attention to the situation and their parents' country and identify with it and its hopes and disappointments.

After the 2011 revolution, I paid more attention to everything. I felt closer to Egypt and I felt the importance of a motherland. I was pretty young and I didn't understand, but that gradually changed (Omaima, 16 years).

Before the revolution, I didn't follow it much, and after the revolution more so, because I believed in it at first. I thought that maybe your vote could count, because, before, you went to vote, but it didn't matter. The same person always won for 30 years! A lot of people believed in it, but then there was a coup, and everything went back to how it was before, or maybe worse (Khadija, 24).

I followed political life in Egypt. I followed it from the time of the revolution until the end, and I still do [...] At the beginning, I believed in the revolution, but after that, after what happened [...] During the elections, I went to the mosques [in Italy], I asked people if they wanted help to register to vote with my computer. And I went around like that, to improve the country. Because the situation in the country isn't good, mainly because of ignorance, the fact of not voting. So I wanted to help from that perspective. I did it just because it was a matter of justice (Salwa, 23).

The revolution brought Egypt closer to the children of migration. For some of the interviewees, this attention translated into direct political engagement both in Egypt and in Italy. Being young and female is not considered an obstacle to participating in demonstrations, sit-ins (even when considered dangerous for their physical safety) to express their perspective and support for one side over the other, both during the earliest phase of the revolution, and during the so-called years of transition. Through news, TV programs, blogs, online platforms, Facebook conversations, Skype with friends and relatives, they started to pay more attention to the politics of their parents' country, variously taking the side of one faction or the other. Mostly the military coup on July 3, 2013 and the repression of members of the Brotherhood and different kinds of political oppositions polarized the positions.

The young women interviewed are divided in their opinions about post-revolutionary developments. If some were in favor of Abd al-Fattah al-Sisi, former head of Egypt's armed forces, supported by some "secular" parts of the population, serving an anti-Islamist function, believing that the country's economic development and freedom from political instability can only be achieved by a strong political figure such as a military; others were in favor of Morsi, leader of the Muslim Brotherhood, who won the presidential elections of 2012, and was deposed by a military coup on July 3, 2013¹⁰. Those particularly supported the Brotherhood after the repression on August 14, 2013 of supporters of the Muslim Brotherhood who gathered in Rabi'a al-'Adawiyya Square in Cairo¹¹. To express openly their political convictions some participated in the demonstrations that were organized in support of the Muslim Brotherhood in 2013 and 2014 in Cairo, Milan and in Rome.

I am not with Morsi, with the Muslim Brotherhood. I think they are religious fakes. It is all just a cover. I think they are ruining the country. And maybe the people who support them are naïve, pious people. At the beginning, when they took Mubarak down, I would have voted for Morsi too, because he was the best alternative. I would say that a man of religion understands well what wrong is, he won't hurt us, he'll know how to lead the country, but that's not what happened. He wasn't wrong personally, it was just that he was a puppet. They controlled him from above. Egypt was no longer safe, including from what happened on January 25 when they opened all the prisons and everyone went out in the streets. There was no more safety [...] Al-Sisi is surely more in favor of helping the country. [...] Let's say that I can't imagine al-Sisi as a dictator. He didn't even want to run. It was the people that insisted that he go into it, the people asked him to (Maryam, 19).

10 For a reconstruction of the coup in Egypt and the arc of the Muslim Brotherhood from the election victory in 2012 to its recent repression, see Daniela Pioppi, *Il raccolto amaro. I Fratelli musulmani in Egitto e il fallimento della via moderata al potere*, in Laura Guazzone (edited by), *Storia e evoluzione dei movimenti islamisti arabi. I Fratelli musulmani e gli altri*, Mondadori, Milan, 2015.

11 Amnesty International's 2014–2015 annual report estimates that 1,400 people were killed and 40,000 were arrested in Egypt between July 2013 and the end of 2014, and reports in that period an extensive use of torture and the drastic reduction of individual freedoms and protections (Amnesty International 2015, 137–139).

I was in Egypt during the attacks in Rabi'a Square. On August 14, I wasn't in the square, but at 7:30 am I got a call from my aunt who said, "They are attacking Rabi'a al-'Adawiya Square" My mother woke me up and went, "They are attacking Rabi'a al-'Adawiya Square" I turned on the TV, Al Jazeera, of course, and you saw all those horrific scenes. My mother is chicken. But on that day I said to her, "Mama, we have to help them. We have to save them" [...] We went out, and we went to the pharmacy to look for masks [...] There was a long march that closed the street. We joined it, and I found some friends there. [...] Then the Friday after that, it was the day of Ramses Square, we were supposed to all go to Ramses Square. It was really horrible. [...] My father is against Morsi, against the Muslim brotherhood. My father is on the other side completely. My parents are separated. When I go to a papa's, we always fight. For a while we couldn't even look at each other. The day of Rabi'a, I was crying and I said "Papa, did you see it?" "So what did I see? These Muslim brothers killing" "Papa, what are you saying? I was there too" "And you're one of them, how can I believe you?" (Salwa, 23).

Though all the young women interviewed said that they were happy for the change that came with the fall of Mubarak, because it opened up new spaces for freedom and – at least in the beginning – created hope and the possibility of economic development in Egypt, they ended up taking different political sides. It is important to stress here that though all of the young women interviewed describe themselves as religious and practicing, and express conservative values in social and political terms, they are certainly not all in favor of Islamist ideology. Indeed, this is an example how the religious revival – on the rise since the 1990s and gaining ground in first decade of the 21st century – and Islamism¹² do not necessarily coincide and overlap. For many, deciding to place religion at the center of their private and public lives does not necessarily mean agreeing with Islamist political ideology. We should pay particular attention to this aspect in approaching an analysis of Islam's spread in Europe, as well as in the Muslim world.

The identity connection to Egypt, although a strong part of all the narratives, does not become the only predominant element of identity. A strong sense of belonging to

12 For an analysis of Islamism and the so-called "political Islam", see Laura Guazzone (edited by), *Storia e evoluzione dei movimenti islamisti arabi. I Fratelli musulmani e gli altri*, Mondadori, Milan, 2015, particularly the introduction.

Italy also recurs in all of the interviews. The complex relationship dynamics with the country that their parents' origin and the country where they grew up can be better understood by drawing on the concept of transnationalism, which is the process through which immigrants and their descendants build social fields that connect the country of origin and the country of settlement. The concept of transnationalism shows us how a series of social phenomena cannot be fully understood using the single nation state as the field of study. Specifically, migratory movements cannot be understood as the simple, well-defined movement of individuals from one, essentially independent and circumscribed, system (a state) to another with the same characteristics. From a transnational perspective, immigrants and their descendants can simultaneously participate in more than one national context (Caselli 2009: 57); the interview excerpts quoted here are clear evidence of this fact. The interviews outline a duality of national identifications, with a general problem finding single-sided definitions.

I do not feel 100% Egyptian, because when I go there, I do not feel like I'm in the right place. They see a lot of behaviors as strange, and they call you the one from Italy. I definitely can't imagine living there. Though I say that Egypt is my country, and there is that part, but it isn't 100%. And that goes for Italy too. I do not feel 100% Italian, even though I would never leave this country, because the habits and culture are now part of you, your identity, and it's the bigger part, I don't know if it's the stronger one. And I mean, if I go to Egypt, I cannot have a whole conversation in Arabic, I have to slip in something in Italian. I can't help myself. It's become part of my character, including the ways of doing things and thinking (Khadija, 24).

I came here when I was one, so I consider myself Italian [...] My father has been here for 35 years. My mother for 25 years. They should consider themselves Italian too. We only go to Egypt for vacation. Until the revolution, we went every year, but we hadn't been for five years, and then we went back this summer. Even though I was not born or raised in my country, maybe my second country. I am not only Italian, or only Egyptian, and I'm not half-and-half either. Maybe more Italian. I am always a foreigner there, at least in the eyes of others (Fatima, 21).

I consider myself more Egyptian, even though then I'd have no identity. [...] At home we speak Egyptian a bit more, but there are a lot of other things, some pieces of furniture, I can't say them in Italian, my parents only use the Egyptian terms. And then I still can't take on the Italian culture. My world is more Arab. [...] Even though I'm Italian for all purposes, the way people look at me makes me feel foreign [...] And then Egyptians consider you someone who lives outside. You are where you are, they never consider you from that country (Maryam, 19).

The identity constructions of young Muslim women of Egyptian origin born and raised in Italy starts from different points of reference, including the home country of their parents (Egypt), the substantial sense of belonging (through formal and informal citizenship) to Italy and Europe, and, last but not least, the concept of belonging to a transnational Islamic *umma* (community) with specific European features.

I am an Italian of Arab origin who hates the Arab tradition, but loves her religion. When I am there, I can see clearly that religion is mixed with tradition, misinformation, and habits dictated as religious dogma even though they aren't. I am Muslim. But Italian. I am a regular Italian girl with her own religious life (Saida, 24).

2.2 Being Italian and Muslim

As already said, the young women interviewed all described themselves as practicing Muslims and gave the religious dimension a central role in their lives, though with different nuances. Only a minority considered Islam something to be relegated to their private lives.

My faith is at home. I've always thought if there are questions, I answer and explain, but I shouldn't impose anything on anyone. There has to be respect, you are in a different society. You can't always put religion at the center of things. Faith is something between you and God (Fatima, 21).

The majority of the young women in this study consider Islam a part of their lives to be lived and applied to their public life as well. In their words, Islam is *din wa dunya* (religion and world), something that influences many parts of their daily lives.

Islam is the center of everything. It is a religion and a lifestyle [...] it teaches you how to live, it teaches you everything, even how to enter the bathroom. It tells you what is wrong. Maybe some people see the rules as too strict. But if they aren't strict and there aren't rules, people do whatever they want (Omaima, 16).

The importance of the religion in shaping choices and behaviors is also shown by the fact that almost all of the youth interviewed agree that they could never marry a non-Muslim person, because they feel that living in accord with Islamic principles and having someone by their side helps them to practice daily, strengthens the path of faith taken and would help raise children according to Muslim ethics. Nationality was not important for these young women, though some of them say they would prefer to marry a person who shares the experience of being the children of migrants in Italy.

Being religious, I want somebody who would accompany me on my path and not hinder me (Alima, 23).

I can't marry a non-Muslim and find pork or beer in the refrigerator; someone who doesn't respect it while I'm fasting or praying. There are a lot of things that other person can't understand if they don't believe. Psychologically speaking, for a peaceful, happy family, it is better this way (Salwa, 24).

I want somebody with whom I feel safe, and is a good person, in Islamic terms as well, and has understood the religion. Because if one day the love should end, which it seems happens, I will be sure that they'll never be a lack of respect because in our religion the spouses have to have the fear of God, and out of fear of God, even if he doesn't love me anymore, he will continue to respect me. This is why it is very important that he understand the religion (Khadija, 24).

This central role attributed to the religious dimension does not seem to contradict them considering themselves Italian and European. In fact, the interviewees saw living in the West as a chance to let them follow the true Islamic message, “freed” from the influence of the layers of traditions of the countries in which Islam been taken root throughout the centuries, along the geographic routes of Islamic expansion. On social issues (*mu’amalat*), Islam adapted to the different local traditions of the countries where it took root. For example, Muslims of Africa and Asia have maintained many of their pre-Islamic lifestyles and customs, though respecting the practices and rules shared by all Muslims. This is the basis of the major differences in customs between Arab, African, Turkish and Asian Muslims, and in the specific features of the emerging European Islam (Ramadan 2008; Ferrari 2008; Allievi 2005, Maniscalco 2012; Pace 2004). In the eyes of many faithful, Islam in Europe seems an opportunity to live Islam adhering to the original principles of the faith, far from habitual customs and traditions. In Europe, where Islam is a minority religion, and often with the majority of the population against it, religious practice for many young people becomes a conscious choice rather than the product of the repetition of practices become habitual that no longer question the deeper meaning of the belief and behaviors.

I think that if I were in Egypt I would not be so practicing. Maybe I would wear the veil because everyone does, I would pray because in Egypt families are larger, extended, and you see everyone who does it. In Italy our parents are more concerned with explaining the meaning of things because you will grow up in a society that is not Muslim, and so if they do not explain things to you, you will become someone else. You care more about your faith in a country that is not Muslim. And then, I don’t know because I’ve never lived in Egypt, but honestly I think that here, despite all the problems, you can live your religious faith more freely. Here if I want to wear a veil, aside from the comments people make, the Constitution guarantees me the right to do so. If I want to go to mosque, be part of an association, I can live my faith as I want to, whereas in Arab countries, it is definitely not like that. If someone wants to have a beard, he is immediately classified as a Muslim Brother, but what does that mean? Now beards are in fashion, even people have them who don’t care anything about it all. My brother has one because he likes it, and he

says, “If I have to go, do I have to shave it? I don’t want to” I can’t stand the fact that if someone is practicing and wants to do all the prayers in a mosque, in Egypt people might say “OK, who knows who that guy is? What’s he doing?” And they start to stare at him. It’s not true that there’s all this freedom. It’s better here (Khadija, 24).

I consider myself lucky to have been born here. If I had been born in an Arab country, it would have been different. When you see everyone doing things, you do them too, even if they are wrong. Here you do things because you have really understood them, so that’s better. Even though some people are afraid, and they say how can we raise our children well, we’d better go back to our countries. But I think that’s a wrong way of thinking (Samia, 23).

I’m more relaxed here, where there are not people around mixing religion and tradition. When I meet someone who is unclear about some concepts, I explain them to them. It’s different when I’m talking to a Muslim who overlaps traditions and religion, then it becomes a lot more complicated (Saida, 24).

In Egypt women wear the veil because everyone does it, and not because they really believe in it, and it’s like that in all Arab countries. And then now there is a lot of attraction to America, Europe, fashion. I go to Egypt and I see a bunch of things have changed. Being here, you try to preserve your traditions, and you protect them; there, habits change and the people follow the crowd. A lot of things have changed. I can see it talking to my cousin, for example. If they see how we live, they say that we are more practicing than they are (Leila, 16).

I really think that in the West we really feel it [Islam] I was sure that I would wear the veil sooner or later. You could say that in Arab countries it’s become more something of tradition than of belief. When you get to a certain age, you start wearing it. And then a lot of people use it as a tactic, because maybe they think it looks good on them. I know a bunch of Egyptian girls who wear it just because they don’t have nice hair (Maryam, 19).

For a lot of young people who grew up in Europe, Islam is no longer associated with the Muslim-majority countries that their parents come from. Now it's a transnational religion that finds its own meaning and opportunity to strengthen itself in the adverse setting of diasporas.

And that's how my love for Islam grew, when it started being attacked (Salwa, 23).

From this perspective, Islam does not appear linked to local traditions, but projected in a “deterritorialized”, “globalized” (Roy 2002), “neo-community” dimension (Khosrokhavar 2002; Saint-Blanc 2002), that can easily join with individual religious seeking that transcends the boundaries of states and family bonds. Many of the young women tell that they were shaped by more than their family teachings, though they are the foundation of their religious background, and that they moved in independent directions.

We are much more aware. My parents were not practicing. My mother tried to be practicing, but my father did not. And they know a lot less about religion than we do. They learned while we were learning (Salwa, 23).

Though the parents are generally the first to hand down a religious identity, and in some cases they continue to be the primary figures, as the children grow up, they are increasingly being shaped by their individual readings, websites, blogs, forums, chat, TV programs¹³, and Islamic centers¹⁴. The young women interviewed identified scholars as their religious authorities – many of whom are Egyptian, but not necessarily so – known worldwide through the media of television screens and computers, such as telepreachers (or televangelists) like Amr Khaled, Mustafa Hosny¹⁵, Omar Abdelkafy or the famous

13 On the phenomenon of the influence of Arab television channels on religious education, see Renata Pepicelli (2014b).

14 In Rome, the Islamic center al-Huda in the Centocelle neighborhood is particularly active. On Saturdays and Sundays, using the spaces of the public school close to the mosque of the same name, it gives hundreds of boys and girls, mainly children of Arab speaking families, though not exclusively, Arabization and religious education courses.

15 Born in 1978, Hosny is very popular among young Muslims, particularly for his young age and ability to address religious questions from a perspective aware of youth issues.

Egyptian *shaikh* al-Qaradawi and the *shuyukh* of pan Arab religious television broadcasts such as Iqraa. At some of the most knowledgeable and forward-thinking, there are also certain European Islam intellectuals who are authorities in religious matters, such as Tariq Ramadan, and are trying to define the characteristics of European Islam (Ramadan 2008).

For lessons, I like certain young people on TV, like Moustafa Hosny, a very young Egyptian, who has a way of talking that attracts young people. I also listen to Amr Khaled, though now a lot of people criticized him for his political positions, but he hasn't done anything for a while [...] You know how many young girls come to ask us advice? And to give an answer, I go and look or I ask. I know a person who comes to mosque and has studied *sharia* and she sends you the source, so you are sure. I ask her a lot of things. Or there's an imam that I like who is in Brescia, Amin el Hazmi. In Italy we all know each other, because with G.M.I.¹⁶ we end up traveling around, going to training courses, and I like some of his conferences [...] It's funny, but I've never been to a conference by Tariq Ramadan, who was in Rome recently and I wanted to go. I read some of his things, and he seems pretty good. Anyhow, he's for an European Islam [...] He talks about these issues, immigration, how to live as a Muslim in a Western country [...] Or I follow people like Omar Abdelkafy, who even came to Italy, but this man and Qaradawi are a lot older, and I know he's now on the European Council, so the things that he says apply to European countries too, it even though a lot of people don't like him (Khadija, 24).

Their relationship with these authorities, who are mainly men, is not one of blind obedience, but is rather dynamic and plural. They are dynamic in that the discussions and practices presented are not accepted without question, but are put to the test of reason and the contemporary age. They are plural in that it young men and women drawn on many sources and writers, while also returning to the sacred texts individually or in groups. Dialogue with peers, whether in informal settings or structured situations, is considered an important way to educate themselves in religion.

16 For a discussion of the activities of the G.M.I. association (Giovani musulmani in Italia), see below.

If there something I don't understand, I ask my mother first. And then maybe if there's a word in Arabic that I don't understand, I have to ask someone who has Arabic and Italian like me. I ask my friend S. or my mother, who is wise. Sometimes I'm dense, and some things I don't understand, when she is desperate, S. sends me some books, or something (Maryam, 19).

On the path of this religious seeking, some young men and women who choose to reposition Islam at the core of their lives, turn towards youth associations based on Muslim values¹⁷. In Rome, the most active of these groups are *Giovani musulmani d'Italia (G.M.I.)* and *Islamic Relief. G.M.I.*, founded in 2001, focuses on promoting Muslim youth culture into harmony with an Italian identity and requires recognition for Muslims as part of the nation¹⁸; *Islamic Relief* has gained ground in recent years and is an international organization, informed by Islamic ethics, focused on fundraising for emergencies and development projects in countries struck by natural disasters or conflicts (Bellion-Jourdan 2004). Whereas *G.M.I.* is focused on Italy, with the intention to bring out a dual identity, as Italo-Muslim, in which the national dimension does not obscure or force into private life the Muslim identity (Khosrokhavar 2002, 166-169); *Islamic Relief* has a transnational orientation, talking about the *umma*, the community of believers as a whole, beyond national boundaries. Participation in these kinds of associations ensures that Islam becomes a factor of integration, as it facilitates the process of young people's social integration (Khosrokhavar 2002, 166). Many of the young women of Egyptian origin talk about having had contact with *G.M.I.* and *Islamic Relief* at various levels, from leadership positions to having just participated in some meetings or initiatives.

17 It is worth noting here that, according to the most recent map of foreign associations in Italy, the Egyptian community is 14th by number of associations; there are 21 associations for this community, 1% of the total. The main activities of Egyptian associations include representing members of the second generation, teaching Italian and the language of origin, orientation. See the above-mentioned report "La Comunità Egiziana in Italia – 2013".

18 We read on the association's website www.giovanimusulmani.it "G.M.I.'s activities aim to include young Muslims within the society through a process of 'identity balancing' tied to the fact that young Muslims in Italy, often of immigrant backgrounds, straddle two cultures, two languages and two worlds [...]. G.M.I. supports young Muslims in developing their Muslim and Italian identity in which their faith in belonging to Italy are joined and do not contradict each other" Founded in 2001, G.M.I. is considered close to the UCOII (Union of Islamic community organizations in Italy). For an analysis of G.M.I.'s activities, see Annalisa Frisina (2007).

Since I was little, I have been going to mosque and to G.M.I.. We meet every Saturday afternoon in an Italian middle school [...] G.M.I. has the goal of bringing us together, getting to know our peers. We take trips, and every year we have a conference, and for four days we go to a place, and the whole G.M.I. of Italy meets, and we focus on different themes, such as happiness, smiling [...] We play games and have cooking competitions, drawing competitions. It is not just for talking. We also do workshops where you can talk with others or suggest a theme to the representatives. Then we do a camp, divided in areas by north and south, also for four days during Easter vacation (Leila, 16).

For G.M.I. we meet every Saturday and talk about a topic. It depends on what we prepare. We've done it by themes. The first month, it was love in all its facets, the love for a person, for your parents, for God, for creation. The second month it was science and the Arab world [...] Those of us who are older prepare a lesson or someone who is always been passionate about something, and so knows more about it than we do, or someone older. For example, one of our fathers always comes to do the lesson (Maryam, 19).

I also do volunteer work with Islamic Relief. They help during humanitarian emergencies, such as in Syria and Nepal, and when there was the earthquake, Gaza. We do fundraising, event organization. For Ramadan, we have the Ramadan campaign, and I really like it. Two years ago we had the first meeting with them. They explained their goals and a bunch of young people were interested. And there's a group in Rome but is not that big, but we do events [...] I also went to a training course in London organized by Islamic Relief (Khadija, 24).

I do volunteer work with the young people, with G.M.I., with Islamic Relief, and then I'm active in a political thing, the Freedom and Democracy Committee for Egypt. I always like doing volunteer work, because we've always had the thing about helping others. I love to be active, to build. I don't like just sitting at home studying, because I don't really get anything done that way. I want to be sure that I'm doing something good for society. This is the only thing that makes me a bit

stronger in Islam. Because I know that Islam loves those who do these things. This also makes me more attached to the religion (Salwa, 23).

The appeal of associations like *G.M.I.* and *Islamic Relief* for young people, including young women who are not particularly practicing, can be explained by their offering a place for meeting and socialization that goes beyond the dualism of national specifics – country of origin, country in which one was born/raised –. The offering is supranational identification putting them in contact with an aspect of their identity, Islam as a religious, cultural, and social dimension that is not always easy to share and socialize in the mixed environments of schools and neighborhoods where they grew up. In the young people's different biographies, we see a recurring need to find people with similar experiences in terms of being children of migration and Muslims.

My best friends are Egyptian or Arab like me. They understand me better, because of religion, language, experiences. The idea that they are Italian, but feel Egyptian. Some of them were born there and came here when they were very young (Leila, 16).

I have groups of Italian and Egyptian friends. The problem is mixing them, because things don't fit together. But I like being with both groups. I have Buddhist friends, one is an atheist. One is Catholic, and I go with her to church when she is upset and needs to pray. And she comes with me to the mosque (Saida, 24).

In the words of the young women interviewed there is a recurring theme of having different groups of friends, that of school/university friends, mainly made up of native Italians and children of non-Muslim immigrants, and a group of Muslim friends, whom they met in these religiously-based associations. These two worlds are not always easy to keep together, and they often recount worlds that stay mainly separate, except from fleeting encounters.

You could say that I change my group of friends every so many years. I used to have a completely different group of friends. I was far from the Muslim Arab world. I was involved in the world of my classmates, other earlier friendships. I

didn't know anyone like me. Then three years ago I met some girls who all had relationships in my Arab community, and it was good for me because I was starting to lose myself. They cleared up some doubts for me, showing me the importance of a woman, how to behave, how to value myself [...] I didn't wear the veil. I started wearing it exactly a year ago and this was because I felt comforted by seeing other girls. Before I had never seen anyone. Maybe I was embarrassed. It wasn't that I was far away [from religion] but I didn't find support. I felt like the only one in the middle of a lot of people that didn't understand certain things (Maryam, 19).

After a first phase of trying to find total integration with their native peers, many young women of foreign origins feel the need to relate to their own origins and to reposition Islam in their lives, possibly seeking friendship that could help them on this path¹⁹. Especially as they grow up, Islam may become an essential element of identity for many young people, men and women, even if not they are not particularly practicing (Levitt 2009). In the biographies of the young women interviewed, the religious dimension takes on a new role as they grow up within a general reworking of their relationship with their roots and their inherited identities. After the phase of childhood and early adolescence, often described in terms of seeking to assimilate to the majority models in society or acceptance of family heritage, individual paths of agency start to take shape. Many young people are seeking their own paths that differ both from those taken by their non-Muslim peers and those taken by earlier generations of Muslims. In this return to origins and to Islam, we see a perception emerge at points that these young women are more religious than their male peers, including brothers, cousins, and friends.

Guys who like me come from Arab countries are less attached to the traditions [...] Now a lot of guys with Muslim parents aren't interested in it at all. It is almost easier to find a converted Italian guy that is interested in the religion. We girls are more religious, more attached to our origins (Leila, 16).

19 However, there are those who say, "I don't like hanging out with the Egyptian, Arab community. I can't relate. Maybe because I didn't have a way of fitting in because I was always with my friends. There a lot of girls from the mosques who, if I see them, I say hi, but that's all. [...] I always wondered, if you're in a country, Italy, why do you have to hide out only in your community of origin. They have this group, an Arab group, not all are Egyptians. Yeah, it's nice sometimes to be in a place that reminds you of your origins, those of your parents. But I think only hanging out with Egyptian people, only going out with them, isn't so great" (Fatima, 21).

This aspect should be investigated further with studies focused on the religiosity and multiple belongings of young male Muslims growing up in Italy from a comparative gender perspective in order to analyze the differences between the two sexes in relation to the processes of identities constructions. For now we can only note that within the Roman section both of *G.M.I.* and *Islamic Relief* young women predominate over young men, playing a central role in these associations. As consequence, currently, a 24 year young woman of Moroccan origin, Nadia Bouzekri, is the president of *G.M.I.* Moreover, it is worth to underline that, according to many interviewed turning individually and collectively to the sacred texts of Islam represents for women a useful tool to affirm gender equality in the name of Islam.

Turning towards religion is not perceived as a return to the past, but as an expression of individual and collective redefinition deeply immersed in contemporary times. “Return to Islam” is a way of affirming oneself in the European public sphere not perceived as a kind of ghettoization or self exclusion (Khosrokhavar 2002). As a result, for some young people, Islam establishing itself in their lives translates into a desire to present signs of a new *pietas islamica* and manifesting forms of Muslim pride in response to growing Islamophobia in Western countries (Massari 2006). Just as young African-Americans did in the 1970s with “black is beautiful”, young Muslims convert signs of stigma into something positive, stating that “Islam is beautiful” (Göle 1996). While a market for “Islamic” merchandise is emerging (like cell phone ring tones reminders about prayer times, and T-shirts with inscriptions praising the Prophet), young women cover their heads with veils that become, in the intentions of some, flags, banners, of the community that they feel is under attack and that they would like to represent with pride.

I started wearing the veil this year, the first day of Ramadan. I wear it because I like it, because it represents me, it gives me strength. It is a crown. It is like representing the Islamic community, and an Islamic woman is not submissive but proud to wear it because it makes her strong and protected (Yara, 16).

According to many, wearing the veil is an expression of agency by Muslim women, rather than the passive acceptance of traditions or male rules. This marks an important difference with the generation of their mothers, who were often not veiled or, if they were, covered their heads more out of custom than out of the conscious choice. As noted, it was through individual study, relating to peer groups, and choosing particular religious authorities, that young people are returning meaning to practices that had become mere custom in their eyes.

I started wearing the veil the first year of middle school. I was in middle school, and I didn't know how to understand a lot of things. I didn't even know how to explain it to my classmates [...] I would say that I wear it because I'm Muslim. It's not that I knew how to find an explanation better than that, and then growing up, going to the mosque, I got to know a lot of girls, including some older than me, and I liked it. I also like to imitate how they dressed [...] So I started to understand more the meaning of the veil, why you should cover yourself. Umm O. taught us and gradually I started to understand. If you understand the meaning, you care more about it. You also care about improving the way you dress. It wouldn't make much sense to wear a veil with jeans and a T-shirt, and so I always tried to find the things that go with it. To get closer to God, you have to always have knowledge (Khadija, 24).

The choice to wear the veil for most of the young women interviewed²⁰ should be set within the general phenomenon of the return of the practice of covering the head in the Muslim world starting in the 1990s. Though, during the 20th century, the veil had been abandoned in many areas, for several decades we have been seeing a “return” of the veil in the public sphere (Ahmed 2011). For most of the young women who wear it today, the veil is considered first and foremost an act of *pietas islamica*, an expression of

20 Out of the sample of young women of Egyptian origin, nine out of 10 wore the veil, and even the one who does not wear it says, “Women ‘should’ be veiled. So I will do it during my lifetime” (Fatima, 21). However we don't want to assume that this is the general trend for Muslim children of migrations. For example this data is in contrast to what emerged from a similar research on young women of Moroccan and Bengali origin in Italy, see Pepicelli 2015. If only some of the young women of Moroccan origin were veiled, none of the young women of Bengali origin were veiled. We should keep in mind that many Muslim women choose not to wear the veil, for variety of reasons, ranging from the belief that covering the head is not required by the Koran to having a secular approach to the religious dimension.

submission to God, and removal from the gaze and desire of men. But the reasons behind its revival are not limited to the spiritual realm; its return to the public stage both in the “East” and “West” has a multiple meaning; in addition to religious, it is also identity-marking and political. The latter elements may join each other or be independent, and take on different connotations depending on the individual biographies (Pepicelli 2012). In the narratives in this study, the choice to wear the veil was presented by those concerned as an autonomous, independent decision, which nonetheless entailed quite a few problems in their everyday lives. Veiled women are in fact the primary target of growing Islamophobia in Italy, as in the rest of the Western world (Massari 2006, Enar 2016). The choice to cover one’s head renders veiled girls and women more vulnerable than boys and men who are not immediately identifiable as Muslims.

All of the young women interviewed here tell of ongoing discrimination that they suffer because they wear the veil, and they agree in saying that they will come up against many more problems when it comes to finding a job due to the suspicion surrounding veiled women. The predominant image in Europe is that those who cover their heads are both victims of men who force them to wear the veil, and are also accomplices to their oppressors. Attachments to behaviors and dress codes that are “Islamic” are perceived as a sign of submission to fathers, brothers, and husbands, as well as a refusal to integrate and rejection of European liberal secular values. In the public debate in Italy, and in Europe more in general, on the subject of the veil we can see a constant oscillation between presenting veiled women as oppressed, and simultaneously a bearer of a challenge to the established order, a threat to secularism (Scott 2007). And, significantly, veiled women represent a form of irreducible otherness in the eyes of Italians.

Even if you speak Italian, you were born here, you studied here, they see that you’re different if you have the veil. They even said to a converted girl with a veil that she was not Italian. Most people see you as a foreigner because of your religion. It’s bad because they consider you something that you’re not. No matter what you explain to them, people don’t care if you have citizenship or not. They see how you’re dressed, and they consider you foreign (Samia, 23)

Because of their veil, the young women feel exposed to a double form of discrimination – xenophobia because they are considered foreigners (even if they are born and raised in Italy), and islamophobia as they are Muslims. Those who wear the veil are immediately identifiable with Islam, and therefore categorized as “foreign”, “submissive” and potentially “terrorists”, regardless of where they were born and raised, their political position or degree of self-determination.

Though it is true that I've taken Italian citizenship, they still look at me as a foreigner, as a terrorist. Though it is true that the state has recognized me as Italian, at the end of the day, it is a piece of paper, people do not recognize me, so I feel like it doesn't count. Bureaucratically, it made a lot of things easier for me, but I'm not seen as an Italian, so it's a joke. [...] Italians see me as Egyptian. Compared to my peers, they say to me, “You're Egyptian” I was born here, and ultimately I am Italian, Italo-Egyptian I don't need to integrate because I am Italian [...] Every day is a challenge. Because you are not recognized as an Italian. You are seen only as Muslim. It is true that I am Muslim, and it is the first thing you see. But they expect, I don't know, what from you, that you are submissive, that you are rude, that you are a terrorist. Everything that I'm not. This is hard. The looks of people on the subway. Sometimes I see an accusing look. Sometimes I want to say something, but I don't know if it's right or not. Or at university you find a professor that goes, “Oh, but you speak Italian so well!” Yeah, I am Italian! And then once I was talking on the phone on the subway with my dad. I speak Italian to my dad, and I see some guys looking at me. I was coming back from an exam and said to my dad “I got a good grade” And the girl goes, “Oh my God, she goes to University!” Yeah! They have a totally different idea of Islam. We young Muslims, who are part of an association, have built this country together alongside everyone else. We try to be active. We have contacts with the city government. We have meetings and projects with S. Egidio, the Red Cross, and then something like Charlie Hebdo happens and it destroys years of work. It's really hard. Every time you think, “Okay, we made it, someone else comes along and destroys everything” Ultimately, Islam doesn't belong to Arabs. It has no citizenship, just like Christianity, Judaism. This is what we want to make clear. It's easy to find an Indian, Egyptian, or Moroccan Chris-

tian. An Italian or German Jew. But they think it is inconceivable to have an Italian Muslim (Salwa, 23).

You are born and grow up in a country that you feel is yours, and some people don't see you as part of it, and they associate you with someone that they think is invading this country (Fatima, 21).

The collected narratives very clearly show that the worsening of the international situation, due on one side to the threat of IS, and on the other from new waves of immigration (especially during summer and fall 2015), which the media and politicians present as a threat to European safety and stability, have worsened forms of discrimination against young Muslim women raised in Italy.

We feel the racism more than you Italians do, because ultimately those of us who wear the veil experience it the most. My brother does not wear the veil. He dresses normally, and he has no problems. I'll tell you about an episode of racism. I was walking to high school on the sidewalk. A car pulls up to me, rolls down the window and someone insults me and then spits at me. Episodes of racism happen so often now, I hardly even notice. I don't respond.

And now with ISIS, the Muslim Brothers, and terrorism the situation has gotten much worse. You walk down the street, and kids say, "Here comes ISIS" (Munira, 21).

3. Conclusion

The narratives of young Muslim women of Egyptian origin analyzed here show the plurality of identity belongings for the daughters of migration. The identity connection to Egypt, although a strong part of all the narratives, is not the only predominant element of their identities. A strong sense of belonging to Italy also recurs in all of the interviews. Children of migration simultaneously participate in more than one national context: Italy and Egypt. Transnationalism characterizes their feelings and belongings. The

interviews outline a duality of national identifications, with a general problem finding single-sided definitions.

Concerning religion there is the tendency to practice Islam disconnected from the local traditions of Egypt as well as other Muslim majority countries. The children of migrations describe the emergence of a European Islam with a transnational nature. They break with the religious paths of earlier generations in many respects, such as for example the free choice of transnational religious authorities, the importance given to peers in socializing Islam or the multiple reasons for wearing the veil nowadays in the West.

We also see what came out of this research in terms of the effects of the current political and economic situation in Italy and Europe on the lives of children of migrations. The economic crisis and the growth of xenophobia and Islamophobia due to international changes such as IS and growing immigration flows, strongly affect their lives, making them experience an increasing sense of discrimination.

Finally, we would emphasize that the image given here, as it presents life fragments of a few young women of Egyptian origin, met in a specific phase of their lives, should not be taken as a still image, unchanging in time, but as a momentary glimpse. As said, positions and identities should not be considered fixed, but rather placed within dynamic, constantly evolving relationships.

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