Migration and family change in Egypt: a comparative approach to social remittances

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Abstract

Based on two ethnographical studies, our article explores social remittances from France and from the Gulf States, i.e. the way Egyptian migrants and returnees contribute to social change in their homeland with a focus on gender ideals and practices, as well as on the ways families cope with departure, absence and return. Policies in the home and host countries, public discourse, translocal networks, and individual locations within evolving structures of power, set the frame for an analysis of the consequences of migration in Egypt. This combination of structural factors is necessary to grasp the complex negotiations of family and gender norms, as asserted through idealized models, or enacted in daily practices in immigration and back home.

Keywords: Egypt, migration, social change, family, gender.

Introduction

Egypt ranks among the main labour-exporting countries in the Middle East, with over 6 million citizens living and/or working abroad, mainly in Arab countries, North America and Europe. In the early 1970s, the progressive shift from a redistributive state system to an open economy coincided with the oil boom in neighbouring Arabian Gulf countries. Together with the liberalisation of exit conditions from Egypt, these factors resulted in mass emigration. Remittances became essential for the economic health of the country. For increasing numbers of citizens, expatriation became a preferred way to escape social downgrading.

Scholars focused on the economic impact of international migration on Egyptian development. Optimistic predictions influenced by neoclassical views (Birks and Sinclair 1980) were counterbalanced by pessimistic reports influenced by Marxist and dependence theories (Fergany *et al.* 1983). Despite ideological antinomies, the two approaches involved the use of quantitative methodologies that are still prominent today, and only a few micro-social qualitative studies explored the contribution of migrants to social change in Egypt. In this article, we examine how the experience of foreignness can alter relationships between family members in Cairo and in the Nile Delta region.

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The topic is part of the interest of migration studies from the 1990s on-wards in "cultural" rather than "economic" consequences of migration on origin countries. This "cultural" turn is also a transnational one: anthropologists as well as historians focused on the influence of transmigration over social hierarchies in communities of origin. These "social remittances", according to a now common (even though rather nebulous) label, encompass all kind of alteration in norms, ideals, values and practices that "flow" from receiving to origin societies through migrants' networks (Hannerz 1996; Levitt 1998). "Social remittances" would remain an empty theoretical shell, though, if not carefully contextualized within power relations that frame migrants' routes (Ong 1999, Haas 2007).

In the wake of transnational enthusiasm, changes in gender roles, norms and representations consequent to migration have achieved scholarly prominence. The "discovery" of migrant women first led to enthusiastic hypothesises about the empowering potential of departure. Our studies are more related to recent works insisting on the interdependence between gender status and other aspects of social location within the power structures of the societies of departure and arrival (Oso Casas 2005, Morokvasic 2007). They set aside cost and benefit approaches inherited from migration management discourses and from culturalist projections on origin countries, and stress the complexity of the evolutions triggered by migration - which perfectly suits our Egyptian cases.

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Our two main hypothesises are the following: first, social remittances are strongly ambivalent, and second, a good understanding of the nexus between social change and migration needs to scrutinize the complex interweaving of social capital before departure, individual and collective strategies, and institutional context of sending and host countries. To what extent do social remittances depend on migrants- legal statuses and socio-economic conditions?[1] Does administrative exclusion - due either to legal marginalization in the Gulf States or to undocumented status in France - favour an "attachment" to the origin country? How are these "long-distance" links with Egypt negotiated locally within sending communities?

Compared ethnographies: on methodology and samples

We confront two independent studies: the first one gathers 54 life-stories of returnees back from the Gulf Cooperation Council (GCC) in popular and well-off neighbourhoods in Cairo between 2006 and 2010[2]. The other, still in

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[1] "More contact with the host society means greater exposure to its different features, more reflection on existing practices, and a greater potential for incorporating new routines. Challenges to the routines of those remaining within the ethnic community are likely to be weaker and to emanate from fewer sources" (Levitt 1998: 931).

[2] Saudi Arabia, Kuwait, Qatar, the United Arab Emirates, Oman, and Bahrain. Most interviewees were back from Saudi Arabia, the main destination for Egyptian emigrants for decades. Many others left for Kuwait in the 1980s, and came back after the Gulf war in 1991. Qatar

progress, is based on 17 in-depth-interviews led between 2010 and 2012 in Paris with first and second generation immigrants as well as 5 in Cairo and two villages of the Nile Delta with returnees who spent a year or more in Le Havre, Rouen or Paris.

In Cairo, returnees from the Gulf belong to a broad social spectrum. Class and generation belongings crucially matter regarding migration experiences. Although legal and social discrimination in receiving countries is the common rule for all Cairene guest workers, blue-collars are more liable to face exploitation and abuses than highly qualified professionals. Moreover, the youngest generation experienced more precarious conditions than the older one, due to the growth of inequalities in Egypt in the wake of progressive privatisation of the economy (Destremau 2004) and of increasingly constraining immigration policies in the Gulf Cooperation Council (Kapiszewski 2006). A major consequence of precariousness is the relative feminisation of migrants, especially because of the removal of laws adverse to feminine mobility[3]. The lucky few who secured long-term contracts with decent wages as highly qualified white-collars, mostly in the public sector, often brought their spouse and children along. Consequently, some of the returnees spent their childhood in the Gulf before settling in Cairo as teenagers.

Bibliography about Egyptians in France (Lafargue 2002; Müller-Mahn 2005; Saad 2005; Zohry 2007, 2009) focuses on poor and usually illegal male immigrants. Most come from villages of the Nile Delta[4] or Upper Egypt, do not speak French and live highly segregated lives abroad. To enrich the picture, qualified individuals fluent in French and sojourning legally abroad – although they may have experienced temporary illegal status-, have been interviewed. They describe migration as a way for personal achievement rather than an economic strategy and say they prefer to live in France – a "country of culture and freedom" – than in the Gulf monarchies –"countries of money and oppression". They usually have many contacts with the host society.

The first inquiry is located in the return city and deals exclusively with urban returnees and their families. The second one is transnational and encompasses rural, periurban and urban locations. Comparison thus seems a perilous enterprise but has nevertheless made us gain an insight into the relative importance of institutional, political, and social factors structuring migrants' experiences. Qualitative and comparative approaches question interpretations of social change based on cultural prejudices about destination countries ("liber-

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remains a modest but stable destination. Since the 2000s, the UAE are the most sought after country. Only two families in the sample had lived in Bahrain or Oman.

[3] Since the personal status reform in 2004, Egyptian women are able to get a passport and leave the country without providing a written approval of their father or husband. Even if the necessity to be morally "protected" by a male relative (*mahram*) is still implemented in the Saudi kingdom, it is relatively easy to bypass according to female returnees.

[4] The most famous, Mit Badr Halawa, is known as the "Paris of the Delta", due to the enormous number of male expatriates who work in the French capital in the fruits and vegetables markets or in construction (Saad, 2005).

al" France vs. the "conservative" Gulf), or fantasized cultural values projected onto migrants along their routes.

Debating the impact of migration on family relations in Egypt

Migration is seen as a potentially disturbing phenomenon for sending and receiving societies. In countries of departure, migrants are often seen as "interlopers", seeking to spread alienating "cultural values from abroad" (Sayad 1999). In Egypt, the media stigmatise returnees from the Gulf as importers of blatant consumerism and conservative religious and gender norms. Young emigrants who recklessly embark for the European Eldorado are also criticised for their unpatriotic, unwise and individualistic behaviours. As for family issues, migration entails a risk of splitting up the family nucleus, which is publicly and legally considered as the foundation stone of the Egyptian nation. Returnees are suspected of diffusing so-called backward Gulfi manners or, on the contrary, over westernized morals. Criticisms aim to prevent possible changes in gender norms that frame an idealized "comprehensive" patriarchy, defended in the public arena as an evidence of Egyptian uniqueness (Baron 2007). Poor, young migrants of rural origin are more often categorized as scapegoats.

These diatribes are re-appropriated by left behind relatives in order to protect the *status quo* in a social context of growing inequalities (Singerman 1997). Stories of adultery, moral decay or familial ruptures are recalled as warnings for emigrants and returnees. They are very powerful tools for social control by the local networks which play a crucial role to facilitate departure and return. Cairene families, friends and colleagues usually lend the required money for visas and sponsorship fees for departure to the Gulf and help emigrants to secure a job and accommodation abroad. On the other hand, emigrants are expected to keep alive the social links with their people left behind. In France, individually led projects are more common. Financial and administrative facilities granted by French cooperation institutions make individual projects easier for educated Egyptians, regardless of their parents' approval. The situation differs for rural dwellers who emigrate through translocal networks, as money for their trip is collected within the extended family. In this case, relatives in Egypt impose their conditions on remittances, and contacts in France are mostly confined to other Egyptian migrants.

How are these complex familial negotiations apprehended by scholars in Egypt? Previous ethnographical inquiries underlined the impact of migration on the promotion of the family nucleus in Egyptian countryside regions, as a means for young couples to marry and live in a separate household (Khafagy 1983; Brink 1991; Weyland 1993). Yet, this process is not necessarily adverse to the preservation of kinship ties: according to the fieldwork in villages and cities in the Delta, many couples live indeed in their own flat, but inside the family building, especially in informal areas. As for the women left behind, some gain more autonomy, while others become more dependent on their

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expatriate or returning husbands, or their in-laws (Hoodfar 1997). Micro-sociological surveys also questioned the "positive" evaluation of change in gender roles. For instance, women might consider stopping work as a land-mark of social upgrading (Louhichi 1997: 9).

In the next two paragraphs, we would like to add a few pieces to this eth-nographical mosaic. We will try to briefly outline the ways that factors such as intra-national origin, class, gender, generation interact with immigration poli-cies in receiving states influencing family issues in Egypt.

Class, gender and generation: intricate relations

Gendered roles are constantly mobilised in migration issues, both in the Nile Delta and in Cairo: migration is presented as a masculine task and leaving is a way of taking on social expectations linked to manliness, since men are gener-ally seen upon as bread-winners. Migrant women therefore undergo tighter social control - be it local or transnational. They leave less than men, are less active both in Egypt and abroad, and arouse greater distrust than their male counterparts. Consequently, female returnees from the Gulf boast about their impeccable behaviours abroad, where they allegedly displayed strong self-control, avoided mixed socializing, and turned down jobs associated with moral decay.

Gender migratory behaviour is deeply connected to social class. In France, female immigrants belong mostly to middle and upper classes, and three con-sequent profiles emerge: students who marry French citizens met during their studies, women living with French spouses whom they met in Egypt, as well as brides joining their Egyptian husband abroad[5]. In the Gulf, it was predom-inantly high-skilled and married women who migrated during the 1980s and 1990s, whereas in the 2000s, working-class single or divorced women depart as well due to the precariousness of job opportunities (Cantini and Gruntz 2010).

Class also plays a major role on types of emigration (familial or single) and on sociability abroad (relations with nationals and other immigrants, residen-tial strategies, leisure time. Family reunification becomes difficult both in Eu-rope and in the Gulf due to more and more strict legal restrictions. Family migration is consequently more and more limited to the urban middle and upper classes. For the less qualified men who leave alone to save up for their dowry or to provide for their family, emigration is a way to accomplish male duties. For them, social control is very strong and not only implemented from a distance, but also assessed by compatriots in their host society. In France, illegal immigrants of rural or periurban origin rely to a great extent on kinship networks, thus reinforcing opportunities for mutual surveillance. For prac-tising Copts, the social control to limit the "risk" of acculturation is exerted by the church that comprises twelve places of worship in France. In the Gulf,

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[5] Women represent 36% of the Egyptian migrants in France (Zohry 2009).

given the highly "ethnocratic" character of Gulf societies (Longva 1997), so-cial endogamy prevails among blue-collars. Compared to their counterparts in France, though, social control is reduced by the legal status of most interview-ees, which renders communitarian solidarity less necessary. As for Egyptian families, they lead closed-circled existences: they avoid as much as possible to mix with single immigrants, whose loneliness implies social inferiority.

Regarding inter-generational relations, changes occur mostly for privileged immigrants and returnees, due to the selective character of family migration. Most Gulf immigrant families return home when their children are old enough to enter university, because foreigners are subjected to higher entry fees in their host states. For these children, the return to Egypt often turns out to be problematic. In the Gulf, they were accustomed to more segregate gender standards. They therefore find themselves in a marginal position in Cairo, when confronted with more gender and social mixing in urban public spaces. Their confused identity makes them critical towards prevailing gender norms in both locations. Most show enthusiasm for gender mixing in public spaces, in contrast with Gulfi habits, and advocate greater education and dia-logue on love and sexuality in Egypt. In France, although second generations are better integrated than in the Gulf, they may also assume an "in-between" position. Generally, going back to Egypt is not envisaged. Young people may claim their Islamic identity as a means of subsuming both French and Egyp-tian identities, like many children of North African immigrants. On the other hand, some children could be sent to live with relatives in Egypt, as a way for emigrant parents to give children - especially daughters – a morally irre-proachable Arab-Muslim education.

Discrimination as a brake on family and gender change

Setting aside 'seconds generations', for most adult immigrants, social exclu-sion due to ethnic and gender parameters in the Gulf and illegal status in France arouse feelings of emotional isolation, which drives them to idealize family and gender roles in Egypt. The exaltation of virility for men or moral integrity for women acts as a response to this exclusion. Consequently, inter-viewees disqualify the gender standards of their host societies as concealed homosexual practices due to strict gender segregation in the Gulf, or as moral laxity in France. The prevailing norms of the country of origin are praised, which prevents major changes in gender ideals back home. On the other hand, the insistence of single expatriates in the Gulf on emotions and conjugal solidarity helps relativize hegemonic models of the authoritarian father and sentimental mother. When whole households emigrate, this trend is strength-ened by their almost exclusive familial sociability. Discrimination thus tempers the impact of class identities and destinations over transformation of gender ideals in Egypt. Inequality remains desirable, although tinted with romance.

However, destinations matter when considering actual marriage choices. For Gulf returnees, marriage with an Egyptian is the rule. Legislation in the

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host country matters more than traditions: in Gulf monarchies, endogamy is such a powerful legal and social norm that mixed unions are rare. In contrast, in France, even though endogamy prevails, mixed unions are more common. Marriage may be part of a true love story or a strategy to acquire the nationality and settle permanently (Zohry 2009). Egyptians often marry French women of North African origin, as an excellent compromise between fidelity to home and integration abroad. In other words, rather than destroying familial structure, international migration helps reinforce prevailing gender ideals in Egypt, while providing opportunities for pragmatic negotiations according to socio-political contexts in the host countries.

Our study also tends to minimize rural/urban bias. Even though rural origin is usually seen by Cairenes and Alexandrians as a symbol of low-education and poor manners, the geographical origin is less decisive than the educational level, especially in villages that are increasingly urbanised. A rural migrant may live very different experiences in France, according to his status, legal or undocumented. But, when it comes to marital strategies, young returnees, whether of rural or urban origins, have very similar conceptions. They wish to have less children than their parents (2 or 3 instead of 5 or 6), to encourage their wife to work (their mothers are generally illiterate housewives). Even though they experienced love affairs in France, most choose to be introduced to their spouses through kinship networks[6], and insist to marry brides 5 or 6 years younger[7], following a constant demographic trend (Fargues 2011). Thus, even though migrants are commonly seen as potential interlopers regarding gender ideals and practices, they do not necessarily act so.

Conclusion: Migration, "for better or for worse"

This ethnographical overview aims to add a few stones to the debate on social remittances. First, rather than "positive" or "negative", gender and family changes linked to international migration are strongly ambivalent. On the one hand, the resented experience of foreignness gives rise to strong idealization of an inegalitarian Egyptian gender model; on the other hand, it also creates a potential for a reflexive alteration of gender norms, in particular among younger immigrants and returnees. As elsewhere, migration contributes to social change "for better or for worse", without following any univocal dimension of a conservative or progressive type (Adelkhah and Bayart 2007: 153).

Second, social remittances take on on-going evolutions in sending society. Although stigmatized as scapegoats in the public sphere, by prominent intellectuals indulging in a rather reductionist rhetoric to oppose "imported" and

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[6] For example, a returnee born in Asyut who lives in Cairo after his stay in France will chose a bride from Asyut.
[7] Several respondents quote the same adage saying "the wife is getting older faster than the husband" (Cairo, September 2011).

"authentic" national values (Al Aswany, 2011), migrants do not seem to revolutionize social hierarchies.

Eventually, the nexus between integration and social change needs to be revisited. Discriminatory policies crucially influence migrants' positions towards social norms in receiving countries, as well as the type of links they keep back home. We have also mentioned the strong supervision by local communities exerted either by distance either in receiving countries, which try to maintain a social *status quo* that doesn't really exist. Yet, communities-based approaches need to be revisited, by questioning their cohesion and exploring their conflicts and tensions. Deeply interwoven within relevant local, translocal and national contexts of power, migration cannot easily be singled out as an agent for radical alteration of prominent norms and practices, at least as far as the family is concerned.

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