

# Immigrant Solidarity Amid the COVID-19 Crisis in Italy: Forms of Help, Intergroup Solidarity, and Recognition

Maurizio Artero<sup>1</sup>  · Maurizio Ambrosini<sup>1</sup>

Accepted: 15 April 2024  
© The Author(s) 2024

**Abstract** Italy was the first Western country to be severely affected by the COVID-19 pandemic. Within it, immigrants have played an important role as essential workers and throughout solidarity initiatives. The present article is based on 64 in-depth interviews with immigrants who engaged in solidarity actions directed toward the immigrant population and the host society during the COVID-19 pandemic. Analytically, it emerged that through solidaristic initiatives, immigrants articulated what we called ‘*claims of recognition*.’ Recognition here is considered in both its individual form, as interpersonal acceptance and esteem for single immigrants, and its collective form, as the social regard of immigrant groups as constituents of Italian society. Despite being perhaps ‘elementary,’ these claims aim to fight forms of both non-recognition and mis-recognition that are pervasive in Italy and aim to transform the symbolic ‘fabric’ of this country.

**Keywords** Immigrant volunteering · COVID-19 · Italy · Recognition · Solidarity

## Introduction

In Italy, the first Western country to be severely affected by the COVID-19 pandemic and the ensuing crisis, immigrants have played a key role to address the critical

situation. Besides being critical epidemic workers (Ambrosini, 2020), immigrants, individually and collectively, have done much to come to the aid of both the immigrant and Italian populations with solidarity initiatives.

This study examines Italian immigrants’ solidarity during the COVID-19 pandemic. It is based on 64 in-depth interviews with ‘immigrants’ (including naturalized citizens and ‘second generations’) who participated in COVID-19 solidarity initiatives. As will be seen, this research examined both fixed and continuous solidarity actions, especially by immigrant organizations and religious communities, and more individual, shorter, and occasional forms of help linked to specific needs or requests (Ambrosini, 2021).

This study seeks to fill a gap in the growing literature on immigrants and COVID-19. Most literature on solidarity during COVID-19 focuses on immigrants’ actions for fellow immigrants (Black, Chattopadhyay & Chisholm, 2020; Galam, 2020; Kynsilehto, 2020) or pro-migrant initiatives from ‘native’ actors (e.g., Bauder & Godoy, 2020; Falicov et al., 2020). Instead, here, we observed how immigrants’ support also unfolded toward the receiving society in general, beyond the limits of ‘co-nationalism.’ As will be shown, this participation is driven by the desire for recognition, especially of individual deservingness, and public awareness of minority groups in society.

After this introduction, we will present the theoretical framework, focusing on the definition of recognition and claims of recognition. Then, the study will briefly discuss COVID-related repercussions on immigrants, emphasizing the forms of non- and mis-recognition. A methodology section follows. The main findings will be presented in two main sections, where we analyze the empirical data. The

✉ Maurizio Artero  
Maurizio.artero@unimi.it

Maurizio Ambrosini  
Maurizio.ambrosini@unimi.it

<sup>1</sup> Department of Social and Political Sciences, University of Milan, Milan, Italy

conclusion will discuss the analysis and suggest directions for future research.

## Defining Recognition and Claims of Recognition

Recognition is a much disputed and multifaceted topic. Theorists of multicultural politics of recognition have emphasized the individual and social importance of recognition (e.g., Honneth, 2004; Modood, 2013). In their readings, recognition revolves around the challenges of accommodating minoritarian customary practices; it can also be defined as cultural recognition, namely the protection and celebration of different and minoritarian cultural expressions (see Chin & Levey, 2022). This equal recognition for different cultures becomes important in light of forms of mis-recognition (the ascription of a negative valuation) and non-recognition (the lack of an acknowledgment) affecting the obtainment of social justice for minority groups and individuals as well as subjective well-being (for a detailed definition of non-/mis-recognition, see Schweiger, 2019). When a group is constituted as marginal or somehow outside the norm, it is indeed deprived of the capacity to effectively influence the rest of society, and its members may also lose their sense of belonging, self-confidence, and self-respect (Lamont, 2018; Modood, 2013). Against this backdrop, recognition takes the form of a process developing through struggles against non- or mis-recognitions (Chin & Levey, 2022). These struggles for recognition are praised for broadening the criteria by which people can gain cultural membership, social justice, and human dignity (Lamont, 2018).

This framing of recognition has been in tension with some feminist scholars. Okin (1994) maintained that the recognition of cultures justifying women's subordination conflicts with the feminist goal of social equality between men and women. Fraser (2007) warned against the tendency of (multicultural) struggles for recognition to prioritize cultural struggles and the politics of recognition over social struggles and the politics of redistribution. Connolly (2010) identified, in feminist thinkers such as Judith Butler and Kelly Oliver, the assumption that the struggles for recognition are embedded in relations of dependencies and social domination from hegemonic cultures and dominant institutions.

Migration studies academics concur that hegemonic cultures and dominant institutions shape the terms of recognition struggles. In studies on irregular immigrants, for example, it has been observed how migrants contest the identities of 'non-citizens' assigned to them with counter-strategies and assertions of subjective legitimacy that call attention to their good behavior and reliability (Chauvin & Garcés-Masareñas, 2014). In particular, to achieve legal

status, they manifest a lifestyle compliant with standards of behavior perceived by the majority as worthy of appreciation (Ambrosini, 2023). 'Performances of deservingness' (Chauvin & Garcés-Masareñas, 2014) like these appear to be particularly employed in neoliberal societies for counteracting forms of non- or mis-recognition. Lamont (2018) found that stigmatized individuals respond to discrimination based on prevailing cultural norms. In neoliberal contexts, specifically, their responses underscore individual self-sufficiency and hard work. These performance-based responses, based on the idea of appealing to 'deservingness' in the eyes of the receiving society, have been also emphasized by migrant movements. Dazey (2021), for example, observed that for French Muslim activists, the best way to fully integrate into the political system is by using 'polite' responses (e.g., good manners and exemplary behavior) instead of confrontational actions.

Neoliberal responses have also been related to active civic participation, by which migrants engaging with churches, ethnic associations, and voluntary organizations positively impact society (see Yap et al., 2011). Such interventions are accused of being complicit with neoliberal logic in sustaining the state's commitment to privatization and the idea of citizenship as something to be personally earned (ibid.). Neoliberal responses generally coincide with 'quiet' actions and a certain reluctance to deploy more confrontational initiatives and tend to reproduce the usual legal and social framework (Lamont, 2018). For critics, they minimize the role that social structures and political or economic power systems play in racism and structural discrimination, contributing to the neutralization of political claims to citizenship (Dazey, 2021; Guzman Garcia, 2016).

However, other works (Balazard et al., 2023; Ellefsen et al., 2022; Strunk, 2015) have highlighted the transformational and subtly political nature of quiet struggles for recognition, challenging this understanding. In contexts where the politicization of discrimination is usually disapproved, there is a tendency to favor subdued behaviors as opposed to overt political endeavors (Balazard et al., 2023; Ellefsen et al., 2022). Nonetheless, these discrete collective endeavors—such as engaging in recreational activities like sports, participating in workshops, and attending festivals (Strunk, 2015)—can lead to awareness of the collective nature of discrimination and imbue individuals with a sense of political consciousness (Balazard et al., 2023).

This dynamic resonates with what scholars have recently observed in connection with 'acts of citizenship.' Acts of citizenship have been originally defined as moments that rewrite established practices, status, and order of citizenship; they often promote a new concept of citizenship via visible claims, like demonstrations and protests, to rewrite the meanings and foundations of

citizenship (Isin & Nielsen, 2008). Recently, scholars have revised this notion, opening the analysis to a broader set of processes involved in constituting citizens, including those consistent with wider 'technologies of governmentality' that prescribe what it means to be a 'good citizen' worthy of inclusion and rights. This includes acts performed in very discreet ways, through daily experiences, and under less visible guises, like engagement with local people and urban spaces, that, despite the ambiguity, allow the development of politics of belonging contrasting hegemonic and restrictive definitions of citizenship (e.g., Askins, 2014; Canepari & Rosa, 2017).

In this contribution, recognition has a two-fold level: individual and collective. Specifically, recognition is defined as the legitimate presence of minority groups and their members as co-constitutive of the political community (Chin & Levey, 2022). Unlike standard multicultural recognition, which focuses on celebrating minoritarian cultural expressions, here, recognition represents the relationship of members that look at each other as equal members of a community, aware to belong to the same collective, without simply concealing their differences (see also Modood, 2013). This might represent an 'elementary' form of acknowledgment, but it potentially transforms how the polity (the political community) is publicly symbolized.

Aligning with the recent broadening of acts of citizenship and recognition struggles toward quiet initiatives, we will observe how non-confrontational solidarity acts of immigrants during COVID-19 express what we can call 'claims of recognition.' To be clear, with recognition claims, here, we especially indicate both the demand for individual recognition of an individual's 'worth' and collective, positive public acknowledgment of minority groups that make up society. Instead, the recognition of cultural diversity (multicultural standard conception's forte) is less emphasized, perhaps because the particular situation of COVID-19 did not favor initiatives traditionally connected with this aspect, like public protests and cultural events.

In particular, these claims of recognition aim to fight forms of non- or mis-recognition expressing ethno-cultural membership boundaries in receiving society. These boundaries are established by the so-called politics of belonging, which can be defined as 'the dirty work of boundary maintenance' of the community of belonging by the hegemonic political powers (Yuval-Davis, 2006). Through legislation and public discourses, politics of belongings (re)produce divisions in society between those who 'really' belong and those who do not; by denying recognition (or stimulating negative public regard) to social groups, they establish boundaries of belonging that, in Italy, are often 'thicker' than the legal citizenship, evoking

a community of belonging based on 'blood' and 'heritage' (Guglielmi, 2020).

Specifically, for immigrants, these solidarity activities represented resources to resist forms of politics of belonging and feed their sense of 'Italianness.' In this context, the pandemic situation (despite many negativities) also opened a space for nurturing a sense of belonging that defied the limits of ethno-cultural belonging as well as for claims of recognition of individual and collective values. As we will observe, however, all this was not without ambiguity and limitations in how these initiatives have reached public appreciation.

### COVID-19 Non-/Mis-Recognitions and Italian Membership Ethno-Cultural Boundaries

Italy was the first 'Western' nation to deal with the COVID-19 epidemic in late February 2020, highlighting its systemic difficulties. Public institutions, especially health-care services, were often underfunded and unable to handle the virus's spike and reach the entire community with supportive programs (Gatti, 2022). The 'lockdowns' implemented to reduce the virus spread were undoubtedly necessary, although they exacerbated socio-economic inequality (Ambrosini, 2020). According to the Italian National Institute of Statistics, the COVID-19 epidemic worsened absolute poverty in Italy (Istat, 2021). People faced fear, isolation, and economic distress.

This condition hurt migrants especially. Immigrants have suffered the most economically from lockdowns. Due to the temporary or informal nature of many of their work contracts, they lost more jobs and had fewer state economic protections (Quaranta et al., 2021). Due to healthcare access issues, they were more exposed to SARS-CoV and had trouble getting COVID swab testing (Pagani et al., 2021), especially when deprived of legal status.

The pandemic situation exacerbated forms of non-/mis-recognition toward immigrants, too. During the pandemic, migrants faced hostility and discrimination (Ambrosini, 2020). While assaults and beatings against migrants occurred across Italy (e.g., the Guardian, 2020; Krause & Bressan, 2020), the former Interior Minister, Salvini, tried to politicize the situation by criticizing the Italian government for not defending Italy against migrants, a narration also reflected by those media that linked immigration to the virus (Arcilla-Calderon et al., 2023).

These are only the newest examples of Italians' struggles to accept their multiethnic identity. On the one hand, many statistics and analyses disclose the negative perception of immigrants and diversity in the Italian population; Italy has one of the strongest oppositions to ethnic variety in Western countries (Pew Research Centre, 2019).

Simultaneously, political debate and legislation tend to privilege securitarian and discriminatory approaches to migration (Corsi, 2021). Many administrations oppose the construction of mosques or Arabic schools, demonstrating that governmental authorities fail to recognize cultural or religious diversity (Ambrosini et al., 2022; Artero & Chioldelli, 2019).

Italian boundaries of belonging present a strong ethno-cultural character. *Jus sanguinis*, which determines citizenship by ancestry, underpins Italian citizenship law. Accordingly, while the Italian 'diaspora' can preserve, impart, or obtain Italian citizenship while living abroad, non-EU migrants must demonstrate 10 years of continuous legal presence in Italy, and minors born in Italy must demonstrate their uninterrupted presence from birth to 18 to apply for naturalization (Ibrido & Marchese, 2020). In the meantime, immigrants cannot vote or run for office, even in municipal elections.

All this is also reflected in the meaning that 'Italianness' has for many Italian citizens. According to Guglielmi (2020), Italians generally consider a person Italian if they share Italian habits, traditions, and, for some, 'blood.' Italian citizens of immigrant descent are likewise affected by non-recognition. Thus, being an immigrant typically means symbolic banishment from Italian society. In conclusion, these understandings do not allow for varied expressions of 'Italianness' and tend to exclude immigrant groups, especially visibly different ones (e.g., Blacks and practicing Muslims), from the recognition of their contribution to and membership in Italian society.

## Methodology

This 2022 study was part of a larger research project on immigrant solidarity during COVID-19 that included an online poll (completed by 330 people) and case studies. This study uses 64 in-depth interviews with immigrants engaged in solidarity activities during the COVID-19 pandemic. The sample has a diversified national background (see Table 1) and a high female participation rate (36–28).

We recruited volunteers across Italy: 27 from Northern Italy, 15 from Central Italy, and 22 from Southern Italy and the Islands (see Table 2). During the epidemic, they were involved in immigrant (Mutual Aid Societies, Religious Associations, and Hometown Associations) or mixed/national (Neighborhood associations, NGOs, and Civil Protection Groups) organizations. Among the respondents, some persons expressed their solidarity more informally and individually through actions carried out outside institutionalized organizations; the participation in these,

however, was not exclusive, with participants who engaged in both individual and collective actions.

Italian Volunteer Support Centers (CSV) administrators helped the research team conduct in-depth interviews with immigrants, including the second-generation immigrants and naturalized citizens. The participants were recruited following research team members' contacts, the expert judgment of CSV officials, and the snowball sampling technique (Sharma, 2017). Interviews were conducted individually in Italian and followed a semi-structured guideline to discuss their activities, beneficiaries, targets, reasons to 'take action,' the outcome of this experience, and (where applicable) how their immigrant background affected their relationship with Italian beneficiaries, fellow volunteers, and organizations. Research team members recorded and transcribed interviews. The authors analyzed transcripts and pseudonymized participants. We used thematic analysis to summarize and analyze the primary data themes (Guest, MacQueen & Namey, 2012).

## Immigrants' Help Toward Immigrants Between Inside Solidarity and Internal Individual Recognition

As highlighted earlier, the pandemic has strongly affected immigrants in Italy. We cannot ignore the profound hardships, yet we note that the pandemic was also a factor that showed and reinvigorated migrants' 'activism.' In particular, many participants offered their help to compatriots and migrants in general during the pandemic, both as members of associations and as single individuals.

As described above, COVID-19 worsened immigrants' economic situation. For migrant groups, some of which are organized according to nationality, immigrants' income reduction has triggered important problems. The activities of their organizations often rely on the contributions of members who find it extremely difficult to donate. Nonetheless, immigrant organizations have responded with innovative and creative initiatives, the most apparent being those that have co-ordinated and distributed critical resources to immigrant people most in need:

In our Senegalese community, there were many people in need: those who were not working and those who had lost their jobs. There was a good chunk who were self-employed, and during COVID, they were excluded from benefits. We made bags with groceries that we delivered to people in need. Our community found this form of help to be close to compatriots who were in need.

(Hadi, male, Senegalese origins).

**Table 1** Participants' national origins

Geographical area of origin	Number of participants	Main national origins	
Africa	23	Senegal	6
		Morocco	4
Europe	16	Ukraine	8
Asia	13	Philippines	4
America	12	El Salvador	5

**Table 2** Participants' area of residence in Italy and national origins

Area of residence in Italy	Geographical area of origin	
Northern Italy	Africa	11
	Europe	3
	Asia	4
	America	9
Central Italy	Africa	3
	Europe	5
	Asia	4
	America	3
Southern Italy and the Islands	Africa	9
	Europe	8
	Asia	5
	America	0

These initiatives represented solidaristic activism directed inside, toward fellow immigrants, who were often perceived (as in Hadi's case) particularly 'in need.' It is noteworthy, however, how, for some, this feeling appears to have nurtured a willingness to help not only compatriots but also migrants from other countries; in such cases, indeed, all migrants, not only compatriots, can be seen as 'similar' based on shared experiences:

*Our migration background leads us to be a little more sensitive to not only compatriots but also other foreigners. So you immediately identify with foreigners. It acts a bit like a mirror because you see yourself in them—the same experiences, the same problems.*

(Razi, male, Pakistani).

In particular, many organizations decided to help compatriots as well as other immigrant groups in a difficult economic situation in Italy through donations of food or money for people's basic needs, including utility bills and house rent. Immigrant organizations also tried to provide for other non-material needs. The domestic confinement imposed, especially between March and May 2020, resulted in the worsening of psychological problems due to the lack of normal sociability and the feeling of loneliness (Minozzi et al., 2021). In response, some organizations offered the foreign population mental healthcare and emotional support through telemedicine. The case of the

group 'Abrazo Latino,' which provided psychological support to foreigners from Latin America, is the representative:

During the pandemic, there was a group called "Abrazo Latino," in which native Latin-American, Spanish-speaker psychologists gave psychological assistance.

(Zanita, female, Salvadoran).

Besides these initiatives from immigrant groups (i.e., mutual aid societies, religious communities, and hometown associations), more informal and individual forms of help were directed to compatriots and immigrants. These were often enacted by participants who are also members of immigrant organizations. Individual help concerns many dimensions, from food distribution on an individual basis to individual participation in online fundraising. However, two stand out as primary.

The exceptional measures to safeguard public health caused problems accessing public services and offices, including those needed to renew and obtain residence permits (see Bonizzoni, Hajer, & Artero, 2021). Some interviewees thus gave bureaucratic information or guided and connected people with institutions. In particular, immigrants also suffer from language and information barriers regarding provisions for containing the virus (Carlotti, 2020). Individual participants decided to disseminate information on measures and access to healthcare services:

During COVID-19, I continued to spread health-related information. It's about informing people about where you can go for a free swab, what the cost is, or where you can get vaccinations without documents.

(Tetyana, female, Ukrainian).

The roles of advisor and mediator provided by our participants were not generally officially recognized. Participants were reached by requests from compatriots or immigrant people because of their 'fame' or the fame of the association they were engaged in (see also Molli, 2023). In these instances of 'inside' solidarity, recognition, and specifically the individual recognition from within one's immigrant community, played a complex but important role: It was both a prerequisite and an incentive

for solidarity. In particular, characteristics such as education, language, time spent in Italy, and the 'success' a person may have acquired in Italy lead to a sort of 'internal' social esteem, making one a reference point for other immigrants when in need.

Concurrently, solidarity initiatives can represent a catalyst for this recognition. In particular, giving help offers possibilities for gaining social status within the 'immigrant community.' Many participants admitted to thriving in the role of helper, which gave them meaning, satisfaction, and high social standing within immigrant communities. Even before the pandemic, Demba and Chand were important references for the immigrant communities in Naples and Padua, respectively. Demba achieved a leadership position within the Gambian community in Naples and beyond, representing the Italian delegate of a transnational Gambian network of activists, for his knowledge of Italian and his direct community involvement before and during the pandemic. Chand is a member of the representative body of foreign citizens residing in Padua; according to him, this position was achieved in recognition of his activities in support of fellow immigrants over the years.<sup>1</sup>

I have become a 'guide' for the Gambian community because very often when something happens to someone in the Gambian community, they call me, and I help, as happened during the pandemic.

(Demba, male, Gambian).

When there was the election [for the representative body of foreign citizens], I received a lot of messages from friends and acquaintances who kept texting me or calling me to say, 'Look, tomorrow is the last day for the foreign commission. We know you like politics; you have a good relationship with people.' These messages made me happy because they recognized that I gladly help out as much as I can. In fact, I always try to lend people a hand. In the end, I was elected, and I am happy; I became a 'voice' for immigrants in Padua.

(Chand, male, Indian).

However, this role is not exclusively reserved for men, as women also hold this position and are important 'nodes' within networks of groups. This is exemplified by Freira, who claims her merit in reaching this position that, in her words, makes her recognized:

The women who approach the association see that I am well-known figure here. However, it is important to note that achieving this recognition requires effort

and cannot be obtained without hard work. I have taken the initiative to surround myself with positive influences, such as joining a network of associations that align with my values. Additionally, I am proud to be a founding member of the House of Cultures and serve as the president of the city's women's forum.

(Freira, female, Argentinian).

As these participants suggest, the reference 'agent' role for immigrants also entails an intermediary role with Italian society. This is also evident in individual volunteers and immigrant associations' roles during the pandemic. In particular, as observed earlier, our participants often liaised with Italian institutions to facilitate immigrants' access to the healthcare system and bureaucratic services. In these cases, they often dialogued with Italian institutions and associations to extend forms of collectively organized solidarity to immigrants that were difficult to reach for Italian actors. Another woman, Maria Marta, recounted her role in establishing an open day for COVID-19 swab tests:

We negotiated with the local institutions to establish an open day to make sure that even those who were undocumented could do the swab test for COVID-19.

(Maria Marta, female, Ecuadorian).

These types of help can benefit the institution itself, besides immigrants. For example, Dayananda did language mediation with hospital staff and the hospitals themselves.

During the first wave [of the pandemic], I was afraid, but I did what I could: there was a lack of information in the various languages, hyper-stressed doctors [...]. Immigrant people didn't know what they could do; if they could leave their homes or meet family members in the hospital. So I called the doctors and tried to do language mediation with them.

(Dayananda, male, Sri Lankan).

Ultimately, as we will observe in the next section, the initiatives of our participants have often involved a dimension that was external to the immigrant communities and directed to the general society and the Italian institutions. All this called for and stimulated the desire for forms of recognition that go beyond the ones offered by compatriots or fellow immigrants.

### **Expression of Belonging and Claims of Recognition: Immigrant Solidarity Toward Italian Society and its 'Drives'**

While the works on migrant solidarity during COVID-19 have generally focused on actions in favor of fellow immigrants (Black, Chattopadhyay & Chisholm, 2020;

<sup>1</sup> Both personal circumstances were confirmed by the members of the research team conducting the fieldwork in Naples and Padua.

Galam, 2020; Kynsilehto, 2020), our study has detected the existence of immigrants' solidarity actions benefiting the well-being of the general Italian population. These go through three primary sources of mobilization: immigrant organizations, Italian organizations, and individual aid.

The interviews allowed us to collect many examples of how immigrant organizations also helped Italian society 'at large' during COVID-19: direct distribution of food or goods, infrastructural and logistical support to distributions, and advising on the correct behavior during lockdowns. In this regard, the most common, and probably noteworthy, form of help to Italian entities was fundraising and donations to Italian local administrations and hospitals<sup>2</sup>; in our 'sample' alone, five immigrant organizations organized such donations. As it will be seen better, there were substantial donations collected by different types of immigrant organizations.

Additionally, immigrants have expressed solidarity through their engagement with Italian associations. In this respect, many participants engaged in national associations before the pandemic and donated their time and energy to organizations' activities during the COVID-19 emergency. By contrast, others engage specifically in forms of short-term and episodic volunteering (e.g., see Ambrosini, 2021). They usually responded to the request of Italian institutions and organizations for assistance during a time of extreme hardship in what could be considered a 'top-down civic project' (Eliasoph, 2009). Despite being collectively executed, these initiatives are generally free from a traditional membership in a group. In Faai's case, she joined the initiatives of the municipality of Cremona, Northern Italy.

I read a post by the mayor seeking 'municipal' volunteers. I was told they would call me to start doing something, and after a week, I was contacted.

(Faai, male, Egyptian).

Finally, there are forms of aid that are entirely individual. Some participants disclosed having helped Italian organizations and institutions like hospitals with individual financial donations; however, our participants also carried out other types of creative, individual solidarity actions. A noteworthy case is Assa, who produced and distributed thousands of face masks (first by herself and later with the help of members of her organization) during the first period of the pandemic.

With COVID at the beginning, there were no face masks [...]. One day I went on the internet to look up how to make a mask. I took the sewing machine and said, 'You and I see what we can do' and slowly I made more than 2 thousand masks and gave them away for free.

(Assa, female, Burkinabe).

The foregoing examples showed the different ways in which individuals and immigrant organizations expressed solidarity toward Italian society during the pandemic: They have offered valuable resources to Italian institutions in need (e.g., fundraising and donations to municipalities or hospitals). Also they have been committed to helping the most vulnerable people. As shown later, these forms of civic participation have (more or less implicitly) become a harbinger of expectations of recognition from institutions and Italian people alike. Specifically, their initiatives are tied to the dynamics of belonging and articulate claims of recognition that move in two interconnected yet discernible directions: individual recognition and collective recognition.

### **Belonging to Italian Society and Claims of Individual Recognition**

As observed at the beginning of this paper, in contemporary societies, even democratic ones, legislation and public discourses establish boundaries between those who 'really' belong and those who do not through the deployment of politics of belonging (Yuval-Davis, 2006). These boundaries, sometimes 'thicker' than legal citizenship, based as they are on 'blood' and 'heritage,' can endanger members of minority groups' sense of belonging, self-confidence, and self-respect by denying recognition or ascribing negative attributes (Modood, 2013).

Nonetheless, individuals can 'escape' the tyranny of these hegemonic politics of belonging and develop 'from below' their sense of belonging, citizenship, and membership in a society (e.g., Isin & Nielsen, 2008). As already highlighted, this is done, in particular, by those initiatives tied to the concept of 'citizenship from below;' in confrontational and non-confrontational ways, these initiatives and acts emphasize the participatory dimensions of citizenship and aim to 'destroy' or at least renegotiate traditional boundaries of citizenship (see the second section). Specifically, through non-confrontational strategies, immigrants, even undocumented ones, express their belonging to society by dedicating themselves to their 'live-in communities' and contributing to their betterment via forms of civic participation.

Also, in our case, there often seems to exist a sense of responsibility toward the place where they live, and which

<sup>2</sup> In this respect, see also Molli (2023); <https://www.quircescia.it/societa/2020/05/22/ripartenza-i-sikh-italiani-donano-55-mila-euro-per-la-ricerca-contro-il-covid/561914/>, retrieved 20/11/2023; <https://unionebuddhistaitaliana.it/>, for details regarding many projects and forms of support promoted during the pandemic by The Italian Buddhist Union.

they feel to belong to, which mobilized our participants. Abdul, a former athlete and Palermo resident, expresses this well:

My relationship with this city is so important [...]. [I decided to help] because I had been in Palermo for many years already, I had always been well, and now I had to give back by helping others.

(Abdul, male, Moroccan).

Abdul's references to 'give back' and 'helping others' reflect volunteering as an essentially altruistic activity and may also be interpreted as resistance to the depiction of migrants as outsiders and free-riders. In particular, other participants maintain that good behavior can be an instrument for showing them as a positive community element.

In a local culture where there is also the myth of work as well as racism, if you come with a skill and make yourself useful to the community everything changes.

(Anita, female, Argentinian).

As seen, scholars have warned against the risk of assertions of subjective legitimacy that call attention to good manners and reliability. In particular, such actions risk contributing to neutralizing political claims to citizenship, sustaining the idea (complicit with neoliberal logic) of citizenship as something to be personally earned. Concurrently, others stressed how such 'strategies' can promote alternative understandings (and claims) of citizenship and belonging (see also Ambrosini & Artero, 2022; Artero & Ambrosini, 2022; Dazey, 2021; Strunk, 2015). Specifically, immigrants can hold their contributions to local communities and their long-term presence as a positive aspect of local communities against arguments that immigrants are criminals and a burden on host countries. In this way, they redirect the meaning of citizenship away from formal legal status and toward everyday practices and 'performances of citizenship' (Strunk, 2015).

Similarly, civic participation can also be an important vehicle for relations with Italian society. Solidarity activities generate social relations that cross the boundaries between 'Italians' and 'foreigners,' as exemplified by the above examples of co-operation between immigrant and Italian actors during the COVID-19 pandemic. Following Putnam's (2000) conceptualization, interactions and participation increase individuals' social capital: social ties that fuel a sense of belonging to the local society. In this sense, COVID-19 has represented a promising venue: Because of the critical situation, immigrants and Italians (individually and as groups) had often worked together and helped each other (see also Gatti, 2022); for many participants, this increased the sense of identification and belonging.

While volunteering, I created strong relationships and a sense of belonging in this community. A sense of belonging that Italians also lack: feeling that those streets belong to you, that you have a responsibility to this place. (Anita, female, Argentinian).

These forms of civic participation have (more or less implicitly) also become a harbinger of expectations of individual recognition, specifically the recognition from institutions and Italian people alike of one's abilities, goodwill, and co-belonging to the Italian society. These 'performances of deservingness' presuppose, from the perspective of participants, that a substantial portion of the recipient societies and, ultimately, public authorities will acknowledge their efforts. Specifically, at the individual level, many participants engaged in solidarity actions toward the 'general society' with (more or less implicit) expectations and anticipation of changing the public understanding of immigrants and out of a sense of opposition toward certain forms of non- or mis-recognition in Italian public and political discourses. For example, Maria Marta claimed that:

Latin Americans have a poor reputation. For instance, in Milan and Genoa, the Latin American community is viewed negatively. However, we, as a people committed to helping others, can improve this perception.

(Maria Marta, female, Ecuadorian).

This sentiment fosters engagement even before the spread of the COVID-19 virus. In Assa's case, a sense of refusal toward the political discourses fueled by the establishment (in 2018) of a government, the first Conte government, with a strong anti-immigrant agenda (e.g., Corsi, 2021), triggered her determination to engage in solidarity activities:

When [the first Conte government] took power, I felt part of Italian society because of my long residency here and the fact that I had received Italian citizenship. But then I realized that these anti-immigrant discourses persuaded many people, and I felt as if I was again a 'foreigner', an outsider. This challenged me. And I'll tell you the truth: It also woke me up [...]. I was triggered by something gigantic, something that I said, 'Okay, so there is no belonging here'. And that challenge gave me the strength to help. (Assa, Female, Burkinabe).

Such expectations are not always disregarded. In our study, we came across at least two participants, Filip and Gloria, whose solidarity activities have gained 'publicity' at the local level:



Filip: *By making it mediatic and institutional, I have, let's say, gained prestige.*

Interviewer: *Have you seen a change in attitude toward you?*

Filip: *Yes, very much, because even those who know you from the journalistic point of view, reading only the press releases, learn what you've done and appreciate you more.*

(Filip, male, Macedonian).

After COVID, in my village, if you say my name, people know me because of my volunteering. And when they link you to your reputation, it's nice, and it also helps with a little bit of privilege. For example, in the library, I needed a favour that I got easier than if they didn't know me.

(Gloria, female, Colombian).

At the same time, the interviews also suggest that many immigrants did not always feel recognized on an individual level by Italians, institutions, or organizations with which they engaged during solidarity actions. Assa, for example, presents a paradox observing that her home-made production of face masks has attracted the attention of politicians from other countries but not from Italian representatives:

I received calls from several African ministers thanking me for the initiative. They were proud to have an African who was willing to help a country like Italy, seriously hit by the pandemic... However, I am disappointed that no Italian authority has acknowledged my efforts so far. It seems as though the matter has been forgotten.

(Assa, female, Burkinabe).

Besides the indifference of Italian authorities, which we will also observe later vis-à-vis collective recognition, some participants maintained that, in some cases, Italian citizens kept harboring prejudices against immigrants even after having collaborated with or received help from immigrant people.

[With our initiatives], we challenged the social conditioning that leads many to reject diversity... [Among those we helped], so many people have questioned themselves, despite the fact that they have been conditioned for a lifetime precisely to reject those around them; but others continue with this attitude of rejection since it is difficult to break free from biases.

(Maria, female, Dominican).

Against this backdrop, some immigrant volunteers have highlighted longstanding difficulties encountered with their Italian counterparts. Kadi shared her experience with an Italian organization, where colleagues exhibited envy and a

tendency to undermine her abilities. Specifically, she felt that their refusal to acknowledge her skills, despite her competence, was linked to her 'foreignness.'

There is a lot of competition and a lot of envy. In some cases, I guess because I am a foreigner, they think I can't be better than them [...]. It has frequently happened to me that what I have accomplished—my value, the value of my work, and the value of my knowledge—has not received enough recognition.

(Kadi, female, Senegalese).

### Collective Recognition and Claims to the Italian Institutions

Expectations of individual recognition are often accompanied by the anticipation of changing the public's understanding of immigrants in general. This is evident from some of the excerpts above, where participants claimed to have taken part in solidarity initiatives toward Italian society to fight stereotypes and gain a positive public acknowledgment of immigrants in general. These objectives have especially informed the activities of immigrant organizations during the pandemic.

As seen, immigrant organizations engaged in solidarity initiatives toward Italian society in two main ways: providing services (mainly the distribution of foods and goods) to the general population and donating food and money to Italian institutions. Both seem to have moved from the idea of overturning a hegemonic conception of immigrants as a burden, a parasitic element, and consequently an afflictive and foreign body in Italian society. This is the case of an organization in Palermo composed of immigrants of African origins that distributed food to needy people in disadvantaged neighborhoods during the pandemic. One of its members asserted that this is to challenge the idea that immigrants are just the receivers of solidarity and reiterate the belonging of immigrants in their local communities:

[We want to] be able to say "I belong to something," "I belong to this land or this community". We don't want people living here to feel different; we believe in equality; there should be no division.

(Momo, male, Senegalese).

As with the provision of services, collective donations to institutions also have this same affirmative character. As already disclosed, there were substantial donations collected through the contributions of hundreds of people making up large minority religious associations (e.g., Muslims) or co-national organizations. Usually, these initiatives move from the wish to show the 'embedding' of the

immigrant communities in Italian society. This is the case of Hadi's Senegalese community in the Veneto Region:

During COVID, our community raised money, and we gave it to the Region and the Civil Defense because we held a meeting of our 'board' and decided to show that we were also part of this community of Italians [...]. There is no point in not helping the country you live in when it is in trouble; it means not being part of the same community.

(Hadi, male, Senegalese).

As Chin and Levey (2022) maintained, political powers are an important source of collective recognition; through measures like public apologies for negative treatments or official acknowledgments of minority groups' contribution to society, they can counteract forms of mis-recognition and signal the symbolic inclusion of immigrant communities within the social fabric. In particular, with donations, migrant organizations seem to harbor a certain expectation of obtaining this sort of collective recognition. Italian politicians, however, often seemed indifferent to these initiatives, avoiding giving them public recognition. Previously, we mentioned Assa's case; hers is not the only example. Another example comes from a Bangladeshi community organization in Venice. Zalim, the leader, along with other members, contributed ten thousand euros to a 'solidarity fund' promoted by Venice's Municipality.<sup>3</sup> With disapproval, he described how the mayor rejected his association's proposal for a meeting and did not acknowledge the efforts made:

I regret one thing: when we donated this money, we asked for a meeting with the mayor, but instead there was no meeting. They told us, "Here is the IBAN; send money there." So, they did not think it was necessary to meet our large community, which has lived here for so many years.

(Zalim, male, Bangladeshi).

## Conclusion

This study has explored the solidarity actions of people of immigrant backgrounds during the COVID-19 pandemic in Italy. In particular, we have seen how these actions have taken a two-fold direction, intersecting with the dimension of recognition. Indeed, if a considerable part of these efforts were directed toward helping compatriots or foreigners in general, out of a sense of 'sameness' and internal

recognition, solidarity actions by persons and groups aimed at helping Italian society and institutions also emerged. Through them, immigrants articulated claims of recognition. In the first case, they sought to stimulate individual recognition and esteem for single immigrants. On the latter, they also expressed demands for recognizing immigrants as constituents of Italian society, and even positive components.

During the COVID crisis in Italy, it is not only immigrants who have made themselves available to the community, but given the forms of non- and mis-recognition and boundaries of belonging that characterize Italian society, their commitment takes on a special significance. Specifically, solidarity actions during COVID-19 allowed participants to constitute themselves as 'good citizens' in a society that views immigrants largely negatively. They are examples of 'polite' responses to stigmatization and discrimination used in neoliberal contexts (Dazey, 2021; Lamont, 2018; Yap et al., 2011). This does not mean solidarity initiatives are unrelated to instances of social change. While acknowledging the existence of a neoliberal framework, participants attempted to 'unlock' restrictive boundaries of citizenship by arguing that individuals deserve acceptance if they conduct themselves 'appropriately.' As helpers, our participants challenged the idea of immigrants as 'outsiders' and bad people; this is noteworthy, especially in the Italian context, where ethno-cultural and physical features represent critical boundaries of belonging. Testifying the positive and integral part of the immigrant population within the 'host' society, these claims strived to obtain not so much the protection and celebration of difference, as in standard conceptualizations of multicultural recognition, as the 'right' to be considered equal.

Such interventions displayed both possibilities and limitations. Individually, participation helped our participants enact their citizenship in their localities and develop 'from below' their sense of belonging, citizenship, and membership in Italian society. However, many did not feel individually recognized by Italians, institutions, and organizations with whom they engaged during solidarity actions. The ambiguous result of these claims of recognition is equally evident in terms of the (lack of) collective acknowledgment that the initiatives of immigrant organizations have received. In particular, immigrant organizations' efforts in favor of Italian institutions, especially donations, only sometimes received 'publicity' and recognition from public authorities.

In this regard, this study illuminates a neglected phenomenon. Indeed, if at the local level, these instances of immigrant solidarity may have received some 'acknowledgment' (with many caveats, see the previous section above), as some participants disclosed, the same cannot be

<sup>3</sup> In particular, this initiative was promoted by the Municipality to give help to those facing economic difficulties; see: <https://live.comune.venezia.it/it/buoni-spesa-venezia-3-aprile-2020>

said for the national level and even scholarly debate. The hope is that increased attention to these actions might represent a good 'antidote' against arguments that see immigrants as either passive or detrimental to host countries.

In conclusion, further research can investigate more systematically the effects of these initiatives on immigrants' self-esteem and socio-political participation, as well as the attitude of the population at the local level, and potentially identify mechanisms that can be replicated at a broader scale. Finally, the notion of claims of recognition can be further investigated in its components of individual and collective recognition and employed in research that covers phenomena that are not strictly connected with the contingency of COVID-19.

**Acknowledgments** The authors would like to thank the participants in this study. Our thanks also go to the anonymous reviewers and the editors for their insightful and critically nuanced comments. Finally, we must acknowledge the support provided for this study by the workers of the Italian national association of service centers for volunteering (CSV) and the work of the other researchers involved in this study: Eriselda Shkopi, Martina Riina, Vittorio Lannutti, Rosa Gatti, Alessandra Ciurlo, and Gül Ince Beqo.

**Funding** Open access funding provided by Università degli Studi di Milano within the CRUI-CARE Agreement. The research leading to these results received funding from Italy's Volunteer Support Centers (CSVnet).

#### Declarations

**Conflict of interest** All authors certify that they have no affiliations with or involvement in any organization or entity with any financial interest or non-financial interest in the subject matter or materials discussed in this manuscript.

**Open Access** This article is licensed under a Creative Commons Attribution 4.0 International License, which permits use, sharing, adaptation, distribution and reproduction in any medium or format, as long as you give appropriate credit to the original author(s) and the source, provide a link to the Creative Commons licence, and indicate if changes were made. The images or other third party material in this article are included in the article's Creative Commons licence, unless indicated otherwise in a credit line to the material. If material is not included in the article's Creative Commons licence and your intended use is not permitted by statutory regulation or exceeds the permitted use, you will need to obtain permission directly from the copyright holder. To view a copy of this licence, visit <http://creativecommons.org/licenses/by/4.0/>.

## References

- Ambrosini, M. (2020). L'immigrazione al tempo della pandemia: nuove difficoltà, scoperte impreviste, opportunità insperate. *Mondi Migranti*, 2, 9–26. <https://doi.org/10.3280/mm2020-002001>
- Ambrosini, M. (2021). Post-modern volunteering and Expo Milan 2015. In *BIE Bulletin 2020* (pp. 86–99). Bureau International des Expositions.
- Ambrosini, M. (2023). Moral economy and deservingness in immigration policies. The case of regularisations in Italy. *Ethnicities*, 23(2), 306–330. <https://doi.org/10.1177/14687968221117544>
- Ambrosini, M., & Artero, M. (2022). Immigrant volunteering: A form of citizenship from below. *Voluntas*, 34, 252–262.
- Ambrosini, M., Molli, S. & Naso, P. (eds.). (2022). *Quando gli immigrati vogliono pregare. Comunità, Pluralismo, Welfare*. Il Mulino
- Arcila-Calderón, C., Blanco-Herrero, D., Matsiola, M., Oller-Alonso, M., Saridou, T., Splendore, S., & Veglis, A. (2023). Framing migration in southern European media. *Journalism Practice*, 17(1), 24–47.
- Artero, M., & Chioldelli, F. (2019). Migration, religion, and residential segregation at the urban level. *Sociological Inquiry*, 90(4), 867–890.
- Askins, K. (2014). A quiet politics of being together: miriam and rose. *Area*, 46(4), 353–354.
- Artero, M., & Ambrosini, M. (2022). Citizenship beyond the normative script: Young immigrants' volunteering as a practice of 'citizenship from below.' *Citizenship Studies*, 26(2), 203–220.
- Balazard, H., Carrel, M., Kaya, S., & Purenne, A. (2023). Anti-racist mobilization in France: Between quiet activism and awareness raising. *Ethnic and Racial Studies*, 46(4), 771–787.
- Bauder, H., Godoy, M. (2020). Upscaling migrant sanctuary and solidarity policies and practices in times of COVID-19. International Organization for Migration (IOM). <https://publications.iom.int/system/files/pdf/upscaling-sanctuary.pdf>.
- Black, J. M., Chattopadhyay, S., & Chisholm, R. (2020). Solidarity in times of social distancing: migrants, mutual aid, and COVID-19. *Interface*, 21(1), 182–198.
- Bonizzoni, P., Artero, M., Hajer, M. (2021). *Una sanatoria tanto (dis)attesa? Il programma di 'emersione' 2020 tra ostacoli e mancate opportunità*. [https://figshare.com/articles/online\\_resource/Finale\\_ConFrontespizio\\_docx\\_pdf/14731257/1](https://figshare.com/articles/online_resource/Finale_ConFrontespizio_docx_pdf/14731257/1).
- Canepari, E., & Rosa, E. (2017). A quiet claim to citizenship: Mobility, urban spaces and city practices over time. *Citizenship Studies*, 21(6), 657–674.
- Carlotti, S. (2020). Migration policy and health insecurity Italy's response to COVID-19 and the impact of the security decree. *Rivista Trimestrale Di Scienza Dell'amministrazione*, 2(June), 1–24.
- Chauvin, S., & Garcés-Mascreñas, B. (2014). Becoming less illegal: Deservingness frames and undocumented migrant incorporation. *Sociology Compass*, 8(4), 422–432.
- Chin, C., & Levey, G. B. (2022). Recognition as acknowledgement: Symbolic politics in multicultural democracies. *Ethnic and Racial Studies*, 46(3), 451–474.
- Connolly, J. (2010). Love in the private: Axel Honneth, feminism and the politics of recognition. *Contemporary Political Theory*, 9(4), 414–433.
- Corsi, C. (2021). Between declared rigour and actual precariousness: Rhetorical profiles of legislation. *DPCE Online*, 45(4), 5190–5207. <https://www.dpceonline.it/index.php/dpceonline/article/view/1208>
- Dazey, M. (2021). Polite responses to stigmatization: Ethics of exemplarity among French Muslim elites. *Ethnic and Racial Studies*, 46(4), 686–706.
- Eliasoph, N. (2009). Top-down civic projects are not grassroots associations. *VOLUNTAS: International Journal of Voluntary and Nonprofit Organizations*, 20(3), 291–308.
- Ellefsen, R., Banafsheh, A., & Sandberg, S. (2022). Resisting racism in everyday life. *Ethnic and Racial Studies*, 45(16), 435–457.
- Falicov, C., Niño, A., & D'Urso, S. (2020). Expanding possibilities: Flexibility and solidarity with under-resourced immigrant families during the COVID-19 pandemic. *Family Process*, 59(3), 865–882.

- Fraser, N. (2007). Mapping the feminist imagination: From redistribution to recognition to representation. *The Future of Gender*, 29(4), 17–34.
- Galam, R. (2020). Care and solidarity in the time of covid-19 pandemic experiences of Filipinos in the UK. *Philippine Studies: Historical and Ethnographic Viewpoints*, 68(3–4), 443–466.
- Gatti, R. (2022). Cittadinanza dal basso e solidarietà inclusiva. *Mondi Migranti*, 1(2020), 1–16.
- Guest, G., MacQueen, K., & Namey, E. (Eds.). (2012). *Applied thematic analysis*. SAGE Publications Ltd.
- Guglielmi, S. (2020). Oltre la paura dell'invasione: Identità nazionale e percezione degli stranieri come minaccia. *Mondi Migranti*, 2(2020), 229–251.
- Honneth, A. (2004). Recognition or redistribution? *Theory, Culture and Society*, 18(2), 43–55.
- Ibrido, R., Marchese, C. (2020). *Italy Country Report*. Respond Working Papers Global Migration.
- Isin, E., & Nielsen, G. (2008). *Acts of citizenship*. Bloomsbury Publishing.
- ISTAT. (2021). *Le Statistiche dell'Istat sulla povertà 2020*. [https://www.istat.it/it/files/2021/06/REPORT\\_POVERTA\\_2020.pdf](https://www.istat.it/it/files/2021/06/REPORT_POVERTA_2020.pdf).
- Krause, E. L., & Bressan, M. (2020). Viral encounters: Xenophobia, solidarity, and place-based lessons from Chinese migrants in Italy. *Human Organization*, 79(4), 259–270.
- Kynsilehto, A. (2020). Doing migrant solidarity at the time of Covid-19. *Interface: A Journal for and about Social Movements*, 12(1), 194–198.
- Lamont, M. (2018). Addressing recognition gaps: Destigmatization and the reduction of inequality. *American Sociological Review*, 83(3), 419–444.
- Minozzi, S., Saulle, R., Amato, L., & Davoli, M. (2021). Impatto del distanziamento sociale per covid-19 sui giovani: Tipologia e qualità degli studi reperiti attraverso una revisione sistematica della letteratura. *Recenti Progressi in Medicina*, 112(5), 51–67.
- Modood, T. (2013). *Multiculturalism: A civic idea*. Polity Press.
- Molli, S. D. (2023) L'Oriente in Occidente. L'insediamento e il ruolo dei templi nella diaspora sikh e buddhista in Lombardia. In: Ambrosini, M., Molli, S., Naso, P. (Eds.). (2023). *Quando gli immigrati vogliono pregare*. Il Mulino.
- Okin, S. M. (1994). Gender inequality and cultural differences. *Political Theory*, 22(1), 5–24.
- Pagani, G., Conti, F., Giacomelli, A., et al. (2021). Differences in the prevalence of SARS-CoV-2 infection and access to care between italians and non-italians in a social-housing neighbourhood of Milan, Italy. *International Journal of Environmental Research and Public Health*, 18(20), 10621.
- Pew Research Centre. (2019). European public opinion three decades after the fall of communism. *Pew Research Center*. <https://www.pewresearch.org/global/wp-content/uploads/sites/2/2019/10/Pew-Research-Center-Value-of-Europe-report-FINAL-UPDATED.pdf>.
- Putnam, R. D. (2000). *Bowling alone: The collapse and revival of American community*. Simon and Schuster.
- Quaranta, R., Trentini, F., & Villosio, C. (2021). Gli effetti del COVID-19 sulla popolazione in età da lavoro straniera in Italia. *Mondi Migranti*, 1, 61–83.
- Schweiger, G. (2019). Recognition, misrecognition and justice. *Ethics and Global Politics*, 12(4), 1693870.
- Sharma, G. (2017). Pros and cons of different sampling techniques. *International Journal of Applied Research*, 3(7), 749–752.
- Strunk, C. (2015). Practicing citizenship: Bolivian migrant identities and spaces of belonging in Washington DC. *Journal of Intercultural Studies*, 36(5), 620–639.
- The Guardian. (2020). As if we were the disease: Coronavirus brings prejudice for Italy's Chinese workers. <https://www.theguardian.com/global-development/2020/mar/25/as-if-we-were-the-disease-coronavirus-brings-prejudice-for-italys-chinese-workers>.
- Yap, S. Y., Byrne, A., & Davidson, S. (2011). From refugee to good citizen: A discourse analysis of volunteering. *Journal of Refugee Studies*, 24(1), 157–170.
- Yuval-Davis, N. (2006). Belonging and the politics of belonging. *Patterns of Prejudice*, 40(3), 197–214.

**Publisher's Note** Springer Nature remains neutral with regard to jurisdictional claims in published maps and institutional affiliations.