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Immigrant Women's Protagonism: Exercising Leadership Roles in Ethnic Churches at the Time of the Pandemic in Italy

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Abstract: This paper discusses the protagonism expressed by immigrant women in religion via a series of leadership roles and expands on this theme by considering the pandemic as an emblematic period in which such female activism revealed itself. While the literature gives important details on gender inequalities generated by COVID-19, this article brings to attention agency, resilience and innovation. The case of catholic ethnic churches in Italy, a country particularly hit by the implications of COVID-19, is the empirical field. This paper uses qualitative data obtained through prolonged fieldwork (2018–2022), allowing to discuss the role of ethnic churches before and after the pandemic. The empowerment processes of women in religion and their leading role in terms of welfare provision and activism are detailed, concluding by considering the implications of these. While public institutions were in trouble, religious minorities, and notably their female members, acted to ensure the survival of non-Italian citizens.

Keywords: gender and religion; immigration and religion; women empowerment; super-diverse christianity; catholic immigrants; welfare; COVID-19 pandemic; pandemic and immigration



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1. Introduction

By March 2020, Italy occupied the front pages of the geopolitical chronicle, becoming the first Western country to proclaim a nationwide lockdown and attracting international attention as a sort of “laboratory” for the pandemic emergency and its health and political governance (Colombo 2021). While severe consequences rapidly impacted the Italian population, these developed not in the same measure and intensity (Ambrosini 2020a), as inequalities were molded by a wide range of intersecting factors (Maestripieri 2021; Pastore 2021), such as age, gender, citizenship and migrant status, as well as socio-economic position.

In considering the complex interplay of these dimensions and their implications on life experiences (Colombo and Rebughini 2021), religion has rarely been called into question, although it becomes particularly salient in a time of need, as in the case of the COVID-19 pandemic (Molteni 2020; Molteni et al. 2021; Sahgal and Connaughton 2021). Faith can represent a source for seeking emotional and psychological comfort, an anchorage through which to create an adaptive effort, or an adjustment process (Mu 2020), in the face of external stresses and unexpected challenges. At the same time, faith can also represent an important reason for altruistic behavior, civic engagement and solidarity (Lim and Putnam 2010), encouraging a proactive approach aimed at developing innovative strategies and solutions under severe circumstances. In this sense, these different aspects can converge in the concept of resilience, which brings to attention the role of what can be termed as “religious resilience” during the pandemic.

In turn, this argument can be discussed in relation to the immigrant population, those who are resettled in a new context and those who have *de facto* faced the greatest impact from the implications of COVID-19. For the Italian case, this is strongly correlated with the affirmation of a new religious geography (Pace 2013; Ambrosini et al. 2018); in the last three decades, the settlement of various migratory flows has indeed produced an unprecedented

pluralism, which over time has become increasingly complex and multilayered. The emerging of a new sacred panorama represents a novelty compared to the mono-religious social history of the country (Ricucci 2017), and the pandemic opened, in this sense, an important window on this realm and on how immigrants turned to their faith communities in a critical period. Per se, as important international scholarship shows (Chafetz and Ebaugh 2000; Hirschman 2004), religious sites are often a primary source in times of need, where both hoping and coping strategies can be implemented.

Looking at this religious aspect for the immigrant population, the gender issue has received scant scholarly attention (Gallo and Scrinzi 2021; Giorgi 2021), and is often treated with suspicion. Religions in migration have in fact often been considered as a field in which the reproduction of gender roles and gender hierarchies is consolidated. However, recently, various insights and evidence have suggested new views (Kurien 1999; Bonifacio and Angeles 2010; Bonifacio 2012; Nyhagen and Halsaa 2016; Quero 2016). Neither religious nor gender identities are static and fixed when transplanted: rather than simply reproducing a model as it existed, their remaking process in a different social setting can produce unexpected changes, as in the case of Italy that this paper aims to discuss.

This is firstly related to the fact that the majority of the Italian immigrant population is female (Fondazione 2020; Tognetti Bordogna 2021). Consequently, religious congregations are often, by extension, a projection of this gender composition. In this sense, the first reason to consider is the demographic side. The question, however, is not only quantitative but recalls important features at the basis of the migratory dynamics in Italy. Often women are the first to arrive (Gallo 2006; Vianello 2009; Ambrosini 2016; Solari 2017) and, in addition to performing the role of financial supporter of their families, are also the first to acquire and develop linguistic, social and practical skills to navigate in a new context. Moreover, they are also often the first to promote the creation of a religious group, to dedicate time to find available spaces, promote activities and collect resources as well as seeking for a spiritual guide from the mother country.

To grasp all of these dynamics that emerge at the intersections between migration, religion and gender processes, the lived religion approach becomes useful. This perspective has been increasingly adopted in the religious studies literature (Ammerman 2007), as it serves to problematize traditions and orthodoxies, capture their practical manifestations and go beyond normative positions of what religion should be in abstract terms (Vásquez and Marquardt 2003; Orsi 2003). This is also the reason why concepts such as religiosity and spirituality are used “next and instead of” religion, which has become too narrow when compared to a reality in transformation (McGuire 2008). In sociological terms, the lived religion approach represents a methodological tool for disentangling the experiences of the sacred from institutionalized notions of religion, in order to observe emerging individual meanings, as these are continuously (re)worked, (re)written and (re)invented by people through everyday practices. This perspective fits the case of religions (re)established abroad by immigrants, as these are; indeed, in movement, they are recreated “from below”, often lived in non-ordinary places and subject to innovations also thanks to new female instances.

Taking into consideration these factors, this paper discusses the protagonism expressed by immigrant women in religion and expands this theme by considering the pandemic as an emblematic period in which such female activism most revealed itself. The issue is empirically analyzed through the case of ethnic churches in Italy. In recent decades, the country has seen a significant growth of new faith communities established and enlivened by catholic immigrants (Molli 2020), and these have progressively become important spiritual and social hubs, a role that is particularly important during the pandemic.

This article starts by elaborating on the complex intersections between COVID-19, gender experiences and the role of religious minorities in the midst of the pandemic crisis in Italy. After discussing the available data and literature, the research methodology and case studies are presented. The empirical sections follow a diachronic perspective; initially, the genesis of female leaderships in ethnic churches is explained, then the article moves on to show both how this protagonism has increased over time, and why women have found

empowerment through their religious involvement. Their activism is explored concerning the providing of a pivotal function, namely that of welfare services, detailing its types and forms during the period of the pandemic. Women have accepted the challenge during a critical situation, helping co-religionists with their necessities. The paper concludes by discussing wider implications, particularly showing how, during the pandemic, immigrant faiths, in particular their women believers, did what the State did not do for the well-being of non-Italian citizens.

2. The Implications of the Pandemic for Immigrants and the Focus on Gender and Religions in Italy

If the pandemic has critically impacted the Italian population in general, it has done so at varying degrees and levels. It is sadly known that the weakest members of society suffer most in times of crisis, and immigrants in Italy paid a huge price during the pandemic (Ambrosini 2020a). They were indeed disproportionately exposed to its economic and social implications (Pastore 2021). In a certain sense, everything the literature has established about inequalities and immigration (Molli 2018; Colombo and Rebughini 2016; Della Puppa and Perocco 2021) revealed itself as true; foreigners are typically more exposed to job-market trends, less frequently employed in good jobs, especially public ones, and compared to natives, they more frequently lack social safety nets, ties and failsafes that can provide precious support in times of crisis.

For Italy, the study of Bonizzoni and Dotsey (2021) also detailed the series of juridical disadvantages that immigrants faced, and a key issue was the difficulty in accessing a range of social benefits that were instituted by the government for the emergency. Again, they suffered language barriers and a lack of technological skills. They paradoxically had more difficulties in accessing information and receiving welfare opportunities, even though they were entitled to the same measures. The Italian dossier on immigration (Idos-Confronti 2021) gave other important details on medium or long-term implications, particularly for housing and in terms of the deterioration of life-conditions.

In this critical frame, according to Italian employment statistics, immigrant women represented the segment of the population most affected by the socio-economic crisis. Looking into data on employees in 2020 (Fondazione Leone Moressa 2021), it emerges that they were seriously affected, as they are often employed in precarious jobs and concentrated in sectors that were particularly vulnerable to COVID-19 restrictions. Of the total number of jobs lost (over 456,000) between 2019 and 2020, over a third were those relating to immigrants and a quarter (24%) were those relating to women (Tognetti Bordogna 2021). More precisely, of the 160,000 jobs that were lost among foreigners, 69% are women's (109,000 women and 50,000 men). Moreover, this disadvantage has also had health implications, both physical and mental (Tognetti Bordogna and Quaglia 2021).

This severe picture is, however, only part of the story. The pandemic, aside from stressing fragilities, has also revealed important response strategies (Triandafyllidou 2022). In the first instance, while many migrants suffered from the loss of their job, by contrast, many others were essential workers, as in the case of health services and logistics (Fasani and Mazza 2020; Quaranta et al. 2021), labor sectors that recovered a key role in the midst of the pandemic. This is particularly true for a country such as Italy, where the same sectors have experienced important ethnicization processes over time (Ambrosini 2016). Secondly, although they were under severe pressure, their resistance capacity is an already forged aptitude, trained by their previous life experiences (Dimitriadis 2018): coping strategies are a skill in migration, and they were used to find solutions. However, when we wonder how and in which ways this was achieved, the answer is missing from public debate and often in the scientific literature, and this answer has to do with religion. Between the State and the market, a religious-based reciprocity revealed itself to be a key source for the resilience of immigrants at the time of the pandemic; an aspect that in turn recalls the issue of religious pluralism in Italy and the role of faith minorities in migration (Ambrosini et al. 2021a).

In the last three decades, one of the main implications of immigration flows in Italy has been the development of a religious pluralism with unprecedented characteristics for its social history (Pace 2013; Ambrosini et al. 2018). The spiritual geography has rapidly shift from “a mono to a multi” religious background. According to the data available for officially resident immigrants (more than five million), Christians today represent the majority (55%), in turn divided into Orthodox (30%), Catholic (20%) and Protestant components (5%), while Muslims occupy about one third of the total (33%) and, in addition, other significant presences have settled in Italy, and these include Buddhists, Hindus and Sikhs.

The role of these new faith realities is at the center of the literature which intertwines both migration and religious studies. This is also due to the fact that immigrants in Italy have generally shown scarce political protagonism, while, from a religious side, they have revealed an interesting resourcefulness (Ambrosini 2020b). Among the correlated themes of research, such as the juridical and legal recognition of minorities and the governance of religious diversity (Ferrari 2013; Pace 2018), the role of faiths in accompanying migrants into the settlement process is a key perspective.

Faith institutions, in addition to serving as a cultural chain in the reproduction of ethnic identity (Chafetz and Ebaugh 2000), provide a comforting atmosphere, both in terms of the reinforcement of personal wellbeing and in terms of new acquaintances and social ties for surviving in a new land, namely “a familiar place” in an “unfamiliar space” (Eade 2012). Religious minorities offer various resources (Hirschman 2004). Among them, we also find solidarity practices, such as the sharing of information and delivering help for facing situations of fragility, a role especially essential for those who are excluded from entitlements, as in the case of immigrants in irregular conditions (Menjívar 2006). The literature shows how religious institutions tend to transform into multifunctional settings (Ambrosini et al. 2021b). In this sense, religions in migration are dynamic, promote new activities and give important support and opportunities.

Furthermore, within this focus on faith communities established abroad, gender dynamics are a key perspective (Bonifacio and Angeles 2010; Ruspini et al. 2018), even though this was an underresearched issue in the Italian debate for a long time (Gallo and Scrinzi 2021). When religions are seen “from below” and in practice, in their everyday and ordinary functioning, they often differ significantly from how religions are understood by the doctrine and through clichés. This becomes even more true in the contexts of emigration (Ebaugh and Chafetz 1999; Cruz 2008), where new settlement conditions, the demographic composition of the community and the external social pressures all affect the organization of sacred communities (Cadge 2004). If traditional doctrine, in most religions, attributes leadership and responsibilities to the males, in emigration the situation can change considerably, and this is something that is particularly significant in the case of Italy, where immigration is highly feminized. In this sense, the effective management of communitarian activities can reveal some surprises.

It is possible to grasp such emerging dynamics by considering the lived religion approach. According to Orsi (2003), who paved the way, this means that religion is more dynamic than how it is commonly understood, it is located in places different from those that are official, it is experienced in different ways compared to the orthodoxy, and is more intertwined with secular and everyday lives than its pure and commonly perceived expressions. Moreover, this also implies focusing on the role of subjectivities (Nyhagen 2015; Nyhagen and Halsaa 2016) inside and outside of institutionalized ideas, and on the role that subjectivities can apport when confronted with external and internal pressures, as this paper intends to show through the case studies considered.

According to this view, even though the pandemic has critically affected immigrants, and especially women, it is at the same time possible to suggest that these immigrants and these women in particular were not passive agents. In particular, they were at the forefront for finding or creating coping strategies, and this especially occurred in their religious communities, as this article empirically shows.

3. Methodology and Case Studies: Inquiring into the Immigrant Catholicism in Italy

The religious pluralism in Italy has taken on various contours (Pace 2013), and it has also become even more stratified and multi-layered over the last three decades. In this sense, while new faiths have been imported by immigrants in the country, as in the case of Islam or of Eastern religions, immigrants have also changed the profile of already established historical confessions (Ambrosini 2019). This is a form of pluralism often overlooked in the literature on immigrants' religions, since Islam more often occupies both the public's and academic attention (Ricucci 2017). Here, the concept of super-diversity is useful and expresses how the "body" of believers in the area of historical Christian denominations has become increasingly multicultural as a result of migratory flows. In other terms, religious pluralism is not only an issue of a less Christian Italy, but of a Christianity that is ever less Italian.

Therefore, the changing nature of the sacred Italian landscape is strictly correlated with immigration processes, and this, *de facto*, poses a challenge in terms of acceptance and integration. According to Foner and Alba (2008)—and their renowned conceptualization of the "bridge-barrier" polarity—the role of religion is viewed as a highly problematic area in Western Europe, in contrast to the United States. While in North America immigrants have historically found in religions a means of inclusion (Hirschman 2004), in Europe this is a controversial path, both from a legal point of view, i.e., how to juridically recognize new faiths into (quasi)mono-religious national settings, and from a cultural and social point of view: how religions can (or cannot) reinforce immigrants' integration processes.

This focus is particularly important for Italy, as it is a relatively new destination country for immigration. Four main dimensions of this problematic vision can be presented and discussed to contextualize the data collection at the basis of this paper. The first relates to the establishment of new worship places as one of the most visible factors calling into question the idea of the progressive and inevitable secularization of society (Giordan and Pace 2014). In this sense, the immigrant population is the main protagonist of a post-secular scenario: a renewed and increasingly complex coexistence between the sacred and secular. The second issue considers the religious pluralism generated by immigration as one of the most important phenomena of de-privatization of the sacred; in these terms, immigrants relaunch the aggregative dimension of the faith that re-emerges in the public space, especially in urban settings. Third, immigrants have blurred the boundary between the sacred and the secular, due to the reconversion and rearrangement of spaces, which have been made into new places of worship, and through a series of initiatives such as processions and pilgrimages (Saint-Blancat and Cancellieri 2014), which attract and mobilize flows of immigrants via highly visible religious performances in the streets of cities. Fourth, the re-establishment of sacred spaces represents one of the most important processes through which transnationalism takes shape (Vásquez and Knott 2014): immigrants reconnect a space with different and more distant spiritual geographies, enriching it with new meanings and new uses that go beyond the local dimension. Thus, sacred buildings act as contexts in which to reterritorialize the motherland and become hubs for the promotion of transnational circuits.

Considering these implications and going into the details of what can be termed as a "super-diverse Christianity", it is possible to find the presence of ethnic churches, and these are religious communities established and enlivened by catholic immigrants. In terms of spiritual geography, thanks to the research conducted, 85 centers have been identified in Lombardy, the Italian region marked by the most significant immigrant concentration in Italy (Idos-Confronti 2021). In turn, Milan—which is the region capital of Lombardy—represents the area where these religious sites are mainly located; there are 40 in the Milanese province.

The city has attracted various catholic migratory flows over time, as in the case of the Filipinos, who are, in turn, the immigrant community with the numerical majority (15% of immigrant residents), of Peruvians (6%), of Ecuadorians (4%) and of Salvadorans (2%).

Together, these communities represent about a quarter of the immigration in Milan, and all are countries where Catholicism is the dominant religion.

Methodologically, this paper drew data from a prolonged fieldwork, which started in 2018 and continued until 2022, before and during the pandemic. This diachronic set of evidence allowed us to discuss the interplay between gender, religion and migration in front of the “dividing line” posed by the coronavirus. In particular, five case studies were considered. These were selected as representative experiences of how catholic immigrants have recreated a faith place to gather in and started a series of social and spiritual activities. Three were churches established by Latin Americans, one of which is mainly attended by Ecuadorians and Peruvians, and the other two mainly by Salvadorans. The other two case studies were churches established by Filipinos.

Empirically, this paper used qualitative data, in-depth interviews (both in presence and online), ethnographic notes collected through participation in various internal activities and documental data, which include information on church histories, church flyers, informative brochures printed by the communities as well as online posts published via the churches’ social media. Over the course of time, among the interviews collected with both believers and religious personnel, more than 30 women were interviewed, and this paper used some evidence and insights to explain their internal role before and during the pandemic.

The possibility to obtain a progressively enriched set of data provided a detailed picture of how these religious sites have dealt with COVID-19’s implications, underlining the significant protagonism of women.

4. The Genesis of Leaderships: The Case of Female Charismatic Guides

The histories of the religious centers taken into consideration are the basis to understand women’s protagonism. How they were established, and through which processes they developed, grew and consolidated, all represent key starting points. From this diachronic perspective, it is possible to contextualize and identify the paths that led women to achieve significant roles and become leaders over time.

First, the ethnic churches under examination were born “from below”. This is an important aspect, as they initially saw a movement of lay people that started to informally gather. At the beginning, micro-social units, what can also be called “religious cells”, were created. Migrants often assembled in micro-clusters, for example at someone’s home, where lay people could pray together during the weekends. In other cases, these micro-networks would have occasional appointments in a church to celebrate religious anniversaries linked to the mother country. Then, this form of aggregation moved in search of a more consolidated setting, also as a consequence of the community getting larger, and this occurred in a local native church that was already established, where migrants negotiated for permission from the local Italian diocese for using the sacred building.

In this initial stage, women were key figures in motivating informal gatherings. In two Latin American Milanese churches, they were the pivotal leaders of these processes. In particular, the Salvadoran case is an exemplar:

(Speaking of the genesis of the church) It was born in an informal way and then it stabilized. In the past, years and years ago, we used to organize informal meetings, we didn’t even have headquarters: we always met in different places to experience our faith and discuss our struggles and sufferings. I’ve always dreamt of creating a nice community for my brothers and sisters.

I had been dreaming about a place where we could welcome migrants, explain them how to live in this society and spare them a lot of suffering, that was my ideal. And this is what our community has become, a place of faith and sharing, where people can talk about their joys and sorrows.

We’ve gone through many stages to achieve this, to get these headquarters. For a long time, we had been looking for our own place and eventually we succeeded.

(...) Even if I die, I know the community won't, I'm the Joan of Arc of the Salvadorans. What's important is that the community's logic goes on. Now the members of our community see me as an aunt or a granny, and everybody appreciates what we have managed to build (leader founder of a Salvadoran Church, Milan)

The experience of this woman, whose name is Moran, is representative of the process that led to the creation of an ethnic church. As she explains, she is a Joan of Arc: she fought and worked to find a place of faith and create a Salvadoran reality where brothers and sisters can officially meet and pray.

In the other Latin American church, a similar path emerges. Carmen, a Peruvian woman, thirty years ago motivated and organized Peruvians in Milan. They were in search of a space in which to remember the mother country and to reinforce relations:

I was one of the first of us, one of the first who started to gather years and years ago ... So, on Sundays we simply stayed together ... To study the word of God, we read the bible and we tried to understand the role of Jesus in our lives, and I know very well about problems, over time people can experience strange emotions, frustrations, and sometimes family tensions consume you, often families are divided, and some problems emerge only later. Over time your energies can be consumed ... Just think of those women who work for Italian families, suddenly they might have to change the place where they are working and living, losing relationships (...) The first thing for me was to put people in contact with each other, it's human, for example, I asked them: what are you doing this weekend? And everything got started (Carmen, leader of a Latin American church, Milan)

Moran and Carmen were significant actors in the respective communities' genesis; they acted to create and reinforce ethnic relations and to find and organize a place where they could gather and share their experience.

This initial protagonism led them to acquire great visibility and recognition, symbolizing the "motherhood" of the community. Within these ethnic churches, everybody mentioned these women who continue to maintain a significant role by participating in the parish council. They exercise leadership by providing advice, accessing internal discussions and in case of problems, when decisions are needed, their position is significant.

This prominence inevitably recalls the role of priests, the male figure par excellence. According to the data collected, these ethnic churches de facto, in migration, born from common believers' initiatives, gather their resources and relations in order to recreate a religious community. This implies that the Italian diocese has to manage such a request—that grows from below—and possibly find a space, an available church in the parish area, to give to catholic immigrants. Only when this happens is a priest formally appointed as a chaplain. However, while he becomes the official guide, at the same time he maintains a second position as a latecomer, because the internal life of a community is already set (moreover chaplains, as a rule, rotate every three years). In this sense, the priest has authority over the liturgical side and lay people have control over the community side and, in the case studies considered, this is again ruled and planned by their female protagonists.

From a sociological point of view, the leadership presented recalls a form of "charisma", i.e., a specific type of authority that develops through the individual ability to make a new opportunity credible and motivate emotions which are followed (Cipriani 2005). Not surprisingly, the concept originated in religion (Turner 2003) and has progressively been adopted in social science studies to indicate how human agency can break and change the ordinary, paving the way for new organizational models. Thus, in the eyes of the members, these women acquired an authority that derives from their initial effort in demonstrating that it was possible to find and recreate a new (ethnic) space for them (immigrants), as well as deriving from their continuous commitment in networking activities. Moreover, they embody the suffering that all members of the community have typically experienced in the settlement process, and they serve to maintain and recall the preservation of the memory

of community. In this sense, anthropologically, they also are an “archetype” of migration: a reason for which most worshippers can identify with these female guides.

5. Developing Leaderships during Expansion: Proliferation of Female Guides

The genesis of specific ethno-religious spaces has progressively led to a new urban dynamism in the city of Milan. Over the last three decades, Milan has seen an important consolidation of catholic migratory chains. Once these flows of believers come to know—through word of mouth or via familiar ties or social networks—about the presence of these churches which reproduce the mother country, they travel from various suburbs of the city to frequent their sanctuaries. These religious points have progressively grown larger and become more and more frequented and attended. As a consequence, after “having taken a place”, catholic immigrants have also begun to shape the context in which they normally meet and new “place-making practices” have developed. These communities, by becoming a sort of urban social hub, are then molded by members’ needs and aims.

In this process, many internal units were founded. That is to say that migrants have created over time internal groups based on various criteria, in terms of aggregative, recreational, educational and religious reasons. For example, every church identified has a well-organized musical group. There are also units dedicated to organizing meals, parties, events or meetings in which members can converse and spend weekends leisurely. It is also possible to find several groups dedicated to catechism for younger people and other prayer groups dedicated to the exegesis of texts and engaged in a continuous spiritual training. Churches may appear simply as ethnic meeting points, where people only share the same language and cultural background, but from inside, on the contrary, they reveal an intense and widespread activism:

Now, here, we have ten official groups, the community has three hundred and fifty members registered and officially we have ten groups ... It’s normal ... We have different groups, of all types, they have different tasks for the church, we have the eucharistic group, the welcome group, a group of the readers, a group of altar boys, the Santa Marta group ... These prepare the mass, the group in charge of offerings, the family group, the choir group, the welfare group ... And so on ... It’s normal (Lota, President of a Filipino church, Milan)

The case of Filipinos, as we learn from the interview with Lota, who is the president of the largest Filipino church in Milan, is exemplar: over the course of time, a complex internal social infrastructure has been created to meet members’ aggregative and religious needs. Similarly, in all the sites identified during the research, there are different internal clusters formally established.

In this sense, we can see how a particular form of congregationalism developed and has become increasingly institutionalized. The focal point is that women guide this process by promoting and organizing new activities and services:

My mother and another woman promoted these groups because from the beginning their idea was to animate our community with various activities and to give our people a chance ... Most of them were looking for places to share time, organize meetings, pray, spend time together and also feel involved, during the week people are busy and during the weekend they want to do something and do the activities they like ... Traditions but also activities that are useful to us for our life, providing help to mothers and to those who are alone. They have created important services for the life of immigrants here (Cecilia, responsible for a welfare group in a Salvadoran church, Milan)

As Cecilia explains, women, from the beginning, have dedicated time and energy, adding a series of new functions to their church.

According to this ongoing process of community-building, as corollary, new organizational roles have de facto emerged. Every group has indeed become formally recognized, and these internal units normally have a president, a vice-president and several other

positions (e.g., treasurers or adjuvants). These positions serve to rule activities and manage their plans. Over time, women involve other women, stimulating their participation, and giving them an opportunity to find a space for activism and protagonism.

We can see how these female figures take on tasks such as organizing gatherings to celebrate the mother country, spend joyful weekends, educate the young and program help services. Once these roles are set, women end up managing the community and its pivotal functions. On one side, they acquire a transversal recognizability, while on the other they regulate the “raison d’être” of an immigrant religious space established abroad. These groups that the women lead address the many difficulties of migrants in their experience in a new social context, such as loneliness, the need to socialize, religious training, information, helps and supports. Therefore, while previously the figure of the “charismatic” guide was introduced to explain the role of these women, we can also consider theirs as a “functional” leadership.

At the same time, the affirmation of this protagonism deserves a more detailed focus. The reason for this is to show how women find in religion a source of agency.

6. The Faces of Leadership: Expressing One’s Agency in a New Land

The analysis of female activism can be advanced by looking at their personal histories. Achieving and exercising a key role involves a set of attitudes and personal aims, and the focus on these individual aspects reveals significant reasons for why women try to become leaders. Claiming leadership is never obvious nor easy and inevitably derives from motivations and strategies.

By elaborating the storylines collected during the research, interesting issues in terms of agency can be identified: what women found in religious beliefs and through which spiritual paths they have become increasingly active. This also means, according to lived-religion approach, to focus on how their faith is intertwined with everyday secular experiences. Women’s spirituality develops in close relation with challenging life trajectories that the migratory process inevitably presents, and this was an important topic that emerged during the interviews.

Firstly, it is important to recall that migrants normally experience a stressful process of downward mobility. Whereas in their mother country they might have achieved diplomas or degrees, in the receiving societies they typically start from a humble job. In their new occupation, the possibility for social mobility is often a complicated path and, moreover, these jobs are generally accompanied by stereotyped images (Bonizzoni 2014), as in the case of cleaning ladies, family assistants, or care workers, women colloquially called by Italians “badante”. However, if we look at their spiritual involvement, we can see how for them a religious setting provides a chance to reverse a “reified-subjectivity” and how they can finally gain a new form of agency:

During the week I work for a Milanese family, close to the city centre, I always do the same things, and it’s ok, always the same people ... The same routine... But here at the church I coordinate a group, we do a lot of activities! At the beginning I was only a church-goer but over time I started to like it and gradually I became an organiser. This involves many more commitments, because you have to organize people, and you have to organize events, also in accordance with the other groups, we share rooms and I have to understand when and what we can do, but I really like it, these are satisfactions, it means I’m involved, I have responsibilities and I like this (Rosalie, responsible for education training in a Filipino church, Milan)

In a similar way to Rosalie’s experience, Dolores, a Latin American organizer and a very well-known person in her church, made a similar point:

(Talking about her experience) I spent a lot of energies here over time and I became another person, often I wonder why I spend so many energies but it’s so wonderful, you can’t imagine, really... Beyond my professional life, for an Italian family, I organize events and activities, every month, it’s not easy, I have to email

people, I have to send messages, understand how to plan and also what activities for the week, I've become a reference for the church and it's so important for my life, I know my service is challenging, I have to combine my job with my service, it is not easy but it's vital (Dolores, responsible for a Latin American religious group, province of Milan).

As one can see, religious involvement gives the opportunity to exercise energies that migrants cannot normally invest in their daily working life. Sociologically speaking, achieving a new "position" in the church can help migrants to reclaim the dignity that is often denied in daily life, and becoming a leader of a group represents in turn an honor for them.

For example, as these two stories mentioned, working as a caregiver may generate several tensions. In the case of Filipinos, most of them work for Italian families, and the stigma of being a good and quiet worker is often associated with their job-condition; a reputation that they endure, and at the same time maintain in order to ensure the job. This can produce a stressful condition, but they try to renegotiate this image within religious groups. Therefore, a church provides migrants with an alternative social setting.

As this empirical section shows, women find in religion the ground for a new activism, a way to escape from hard and tedious jobs, and to gain respectability, prestige and status. Religion represents a possibility to subvert a reified subjectivity. While faith, culturally, expresses a way to stay connected with the past, it also gives a means for living in the present, where new meanings are discovered by members.

In conclusion, the agency presented in relation to religious dynamics deserves to be also related to external pressures and limits. Firstly, according to a series of studies performed on Italian and Milanese cases, immigrant women are often stressed by the difficulties in achieving a balance between work and family (Bonizzoni 2015), as well as being stressed by the transnational links they try to maintain, also through remittances, which can create emotional and psychological tensions (Boccagni 2016). Moreover, religious protagonism should be valued in considering that the Italian legal system provides few incentives in terms of political activism and agency (Pilati 2012); this is due to the juridical restriction of their voting rights, which are in turn strictly linked to a very complex access to formal citizenship (Ambrosini 2020b). In this sense, religious places represent an area where a form of agency and leadership can be expressed without the required of formal titles.

7. Women Assisting Those in Need: "Welfare from Below" in Ethnic Churches

Along with the internal vitalism observed, it is important to focus on the development of another pivotal function within the ethnic churches considered: what can be termed as a "welfare from below".

In the first instance, religious communities serve as a free space, a forum where people can talk about their problems. Over the course of time, this led to the creation of a proper space, and some churches have become formal information points: an office or a group that people can use or contact in order to find solutions. This is a service through which migrants try to address various types of needs associated with their experience. In the case of a Latin American church, some members have created an ad hoc desk:

There is a listening centre here, where people come if they want to speak, speak about their problems. Often a person is alone and has critical concerns about their family, tensions, violence, or problems with children, they are really stressed, there are a lot of psychological tensions, it's not easy, people want to talk with someone, and we are here to listen to them, trying to understand if it's possible to find a solution. In a certain sense, here you can do it better than elsewhere, confiding in someone is not easy... some people have problems that create also psychological conditions, like loneliness, isolation or depression, this is the reason why we have a "listening centre", people can come here freely, and we try to understand how we can help, we start a relationship with them. Finding true

relationships these days can be difficult. Other times we can provide a contact with other associations that have greater means for helping them (Idalia, Secretary of a Latin American church, Milan)

A woman, Idalia, was appointed to manage this desk. Her experience with community problems and the recognition she developed represent important skills in terms of coordination, intermediation and problem solving. As she says: “here you can do it better than elsewhere”. A similar service has also been set up in the case of Salvadorans, and Cecilia rules it:

We have a group, this is an internal group aimed at helping people, the group has a staff and I coordinate the others, we help people by giving some information or more serious support, we help families for everything, as in the case of food packages, we have a food pantry and collect food, we help children, we help for medicines, we accompany people in need at the hospital, or we give legal advice, the staff has competences (Cecilia, responsible for a welfare group in a Salvadoran church, Milan)

Cecilia, from the beginning, has encouraged the growth of this internal welfare group. She developed skills and competences also by studying and taking courses on how to provide counselling and social services.

Among the types of support, one theme concerns help in the form of legal advice. Church members with a consolidated knowledge of juridical issues assist their “brothers” in moving within a new legal framework. They, for example, accompany new entries and try to solve critical situations, such as in the case of overstayers. Moreover, having become reliable settings for the exchange of information, religious communities have become essential hubs for participating in several social aspects of the host society, such as the labor market or housing. The circulation of advice on available rooms or job offers is recurrent. In this specific case, ethnic churches operate as “brokers of trust” between labor supply and demand. Recognition and respectability obtained through church membership indeed becomes the basis for the exchange of information. In the Italian case, especially in certain city areas, this mechanism is particularly significant, given the diffusion of domestic and care work:

I spread the info to the various groups, as the choir group or the Bible readers, I send them a message: there is a job offer. . . Is any of you available? Otherwise, Filipinos may ask me, and I know who is looking for a job and when I hear an offer, I put people in contact, this is important for us, it presents an opportunity for all of us (Michelle, secretary of a Filipino Church, Milan)

Michelle, as with other women, helps and intermediates so that members can have a job and avoid unemployment. As she says: “an opportunity for all of us”.

While one’s legal status, residence and occupation are crucial and daily issues for migrants’ quality of life, nevertheless it is possible to observe how within churches other forms of help take shape, such as the organization of meals or events to raise funds. In fact, collecting money for different purposes is a recurrent practice in all of the sites that were studied:

Here we regularly raise funds for everything, it’s a typical Filipino activity, generally if there is a target, the Filipinos will surely achieve it. Groups are active . . . If people are facing a critical period, they organise funds or activities to raise funds . . . It is a small help, but it’s something (Lota, President of a Filipino church, Milan)

We try to help as we can, but we do it only for a specific need. For example: if a person has an expensive medical treatment to undergo, we raise funds and we pay for that. If someone has an economic problem, he can call those who are in our group, for example he says that he will cook something, and then we talk to

each other and we buy everything (Carmen, leader of a Latin American church, Milan)

As is known, fundraising is a typical religious activity, and within ethnic churches this practice is even more important given members' stories, and it is also sponsored via chats or social network pages.

According to the benefits identified in different sites, a broader consideration can be advanced. It is possible to see how ethnic churches have organized what can be termed as "welfare from below"; that is, the development of mutual aid, acts of solidarity, assistance, as well as formal services to support members' needs and requests. Secondly, and closely related, the role of women, as in the stories quoted, has become particularly central for the progress of this type of welfare. Within its complex texture, they usually perform key functions, for instance as counsellors in offices as well as organizers of fundraising activities. They manage these tasks, becoming significant points of reference for those who are in need. In performing solidarity, women achieve and reinforce internal recognizability: they have the solution for key problems.

8. Taking Care of Non-Italian Citizens at the Time of the Pandemic

We have seen how ethnic churches represent welfare hubs, and this role has become even more significant during the pandemic. Mostly in Italy, while state institutions have de facto forgotten non-Italian citizens during the coronavirus crisis, religious sites have instead operated as precious points of reference, contributing to immigrants' capacity for resilience.

Going into the details of this religious resilience, a first issue to consider is that communities were initially under stress. Understandably, immigrant worshippers started to look to their churches in a critical and confusing period:

You know, for us it was difficult, in particular the fact of not being able to share those moments like the Sunday meeting. The lockdown was critical, every Sunday is an opportunity for us, we look forward the Sunday, typically we organise various activities, for example the preparation of lunches on a rotation between groups, which allows us to have those micro funds that are crucial for projects and precisely for emergency needs. Therefore, we certainly lost the religious and social part, it was a concrete challenge for our solidarity, but we invented new ways (Cecilia, responsible for a welfare group in a Salvadoran church, Milan)

Cecilia's testimony shows how the pandemic became a challenge. At the same time, leaders were not discouraged and reinvented their "presence" in a short period of time. They reorganized their activism by translating it via social media. Ethnic churches started to use media platforms and the religious social capital assembled internally progressively took a virtual form.

In this rescheduling, leaders continuously stayed in touch with families and people. Firstly, knowing their members very well, they maintained contact with them, providing psychological support—through virtual calls or chats—when lockdowns were officially instituted as well as during quarantine periods. This was a particularly precious form of help for those who lived alone, in a single room and without relatives, and for families located in small apartments. Secondly, leaders translated information (pandemic guidelines and restrictions) into the native language and created posters to run in the chats. Worshipers were informed and leaders called them about what they could or could not do. On this issue it is also important to stress that Italian public institutions, at the beginning of the pandemic, did not provide such services to immigrants, and that it was instead the communities who filled the gap, functioning as intermediaries.

Thirdly, communities increased their support for those who were most vulnerable and fragile, such as people without legal documents, single mothers and unemployed people:

During the emergency, we faced situations of critical vulnerability, especially for the loss of work of many people, you can think of the lockdown and the loss of occupation for some of us, like domestic workers, we tried to distribute food parcels while maintaining all the safety measures during lockdowns, we identified cases of fragility and we tried to provide guidance, just think ... of people without documents ... those who did not have documents were more afraid ... If you are irregular you can't go to the markets because you are afraid of controls and you stay at home, on the other hand I remember the families who had symptoms of COVID and were without documents and it wasn't easy understand how to provide help, we had no information ... Think of quarantine in a small apartment, maybe something similar happened in Italian families, but if you have two or three children and only one computer ... We shared information about how to help children for these particular needs (Cecilia, responsible for a welfare group in a Salvadoran church, Milan)

Ethnic churches, where possible, invented solutions by mobilizing internal ties and sharing solutions for specific needs. Moreover, faith communities also received and managed external requests—that is, people who normally do not attend mass but, without solutions, turn to churches. Therefore, it can be seen how the welfare role expanded its range of action beyond its normal function:

Latin-American families from outside asked us for help, sure, and where possible we moved to address their requests, many called me and others to understand what kind of help they could find, we tried to do the best and, honestly, we were really generous, those of us who were lucky shared some help with those in difficulty, then we actually used the funds we saved up in happier times (Dolores, responsible for a Latin American religious group, province of Milan)

As mentioned by Dolores, solidarity, even if normally linked to regular attendance, also shifted towards external people according to their possibilities. As explained by the same leader, some families wrote to her via chat or via her social network profile in search of help and she managed these requests, trying to provide an answer or giving the contact of another family in the same area. In a certain sense, she worked to fill a social capital gap. In the same line, a Filipino Church, as mentioned by the woman in charge, came forward to distribute food parcels to all Filipino migrants in the province of Milan, transforming the church into an urban hub providing help.

Fourthly, in some cases, solidarity took on an important civic profile. For example, one Filipino community and a Latin American community cooperated in synergy with the dioceses or other catholic charities, both donating masks or healthcare devices and raising funds for local volunteer groups. Other churchgoers, during the interviews and the ethnographic sessions, emphasized that they also tried to make their contribution with small but significant acts of solidarity in the neighborhoods where they reside, helping the elderly or people in difficulty, for example during quarantines.

A concluding remark on this pandemic welfare is that all form of help identified came from a not particularly wealthy part of the population. Immigrants themselves critically suffered the implications of COVID-19, but at the same time their generosity did not stop, and it also moved towards the local population.

9. Conclusions. Immigrant Women's Protagonism between Lights and Shadows

This paper sought to go beyond the disadvantages the pandemic posed to immigrant women, presenting another face of the coin. While the literature gives important details on the inequalities generated by the pandemic, it is, however, valuable to bring to light agency, resilience and innovation.

In this line, the article has presented the protagonism expressed by immigrant women in religion via leadership roles, and it has expanded this theme by considering the pandemic as an emblematic period in which this female activism revealed itself. The case of catholic

ethnic churches in Italy, a country particularly hit by COVID-19, has been the empirical field of discussion.

This paper initially contextualized the empirical study in relation to the development of an unprecedented religious pluralism in Italy, which has become even more stratified and complex over the last three decades. Only recently has this new sacred panorama received attention, and this article inquired into what can be termed as a “super-diverse Christianity”, showing how the same religious pluralism is not only a question of a less Christian Italy, but of a Christianity that is ever less Italian.

Thus, the analysis started by considering a “diachronic perspective”, in terms of how women were pivotal in the genesis of ethnic churches, gaining a leadership that recalls charisma. Then, the study explained how many female believers have developed and affirmed important visibility over time by managing various internal activities. A significant point is that ethnic churches are lively and dynamic; in addition to being spaces to recall a form of belonging with the mother country, these realities set out a wide range of socio-religious initiatives. In the midst of this complex organization, women perform and assure key tasks, e.g., recreation, meetings, events, education, training and support.

Once these gender dynamics were considered within churches, the paper moved on to consider their role during the pandemic, and it presented the issue of “welfare from below”. By encouraging and supporting interrelations, religious spaces have, over time, reinforced their presence in terms of assistance and help. Mutual aid and reciprocal support, acts of solidarity as well as formal or informal services have been presented as a case in point. The role of female leaders in managing this welfare during the coronavirus crisis has been significant, in that it invented coping strategies, motivating members, providing help beyond outside communities and promoting civic actions. Churches have provided both psychological and material assistance. If leadership stands out in moments of crisis, immigrant women have stood out and worked to fill the gap the pandemic posed between citizens and non-citizens.

In evaluating this activism, however, it can be observed that among the well-deserved public recognition for those who “fought” during the pandemic, immigrants have not received much attention, and much less so their religious minorities. Immigrants surely suffered, but on the other hand, they faced this critical situation and worked for the community with solidarity, as in the case of the women that the article mentions and their role in preventing more widespread marginality. All in all, the public discourse on gender, religion and migration is still dominated by a suspicious viewpoint, while interesting processes are emerging.

As this paper shows, behind the stigmatized image that is all too often painted of immigrant women in Italy, it is possible to discover very ingenious community leaders.

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