



THE ERITREAN DIASPORA IN MILAN: SUCCESSFUL AND UNSUCCESSFUL MODELS OF AGING

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INTRODUCTION

This report is the result of fieldwork research conducted under the framework of TAAD (“The Aging African Diasporas: Perspectives from Lombardia”), a project led by Prof. Alice Bellagamba (University of Milano-Bicocca) that for three years has investigated the meanings of aging for members of the Eritrean, Senegalese, and Egyptian diasporas in Lombardy. More specifically, this report explores the results that emerged from semi-structured interviews and informal conversations with 68 people of Eritrean origin (36 women and 32 men) collected in Milan and its province between 2018 and 2020. The great majority of my interlocutors were over 65 years old and moved to Italy between the end of the 1960s and the 1980s, but younger members of the diaspora have been also interviewed to better address how meanings of aging change along generational lines. Since the beginning of the lockdown imposed by the Covid-19 pandemic in March 2020¹, some of these conversations have been conducted using telephonic or online means of communication. In this report I use pseudonyms and other precautions to guarantee the complete anonymity of my interlocutors.

The Eritrean diaspora in Milan has a small, but significant presence (1,570 people in 2021, according to Istat, but this data does not count those who acquired Italian citizenship over time)². Among the eldest ones, there are women who worked as housemaids for rich Italian families for more than thirty years and now struggle to make ends meet with their minimum pensions (see, for instance, Marchetti 2014), but there are also relatively wealthy men, some of whom had a successful migratory trajectory and ran the many Eritrean restaurants concentrated in the central and rich neighbourhood of Porta Venezia (see, for instance, Arnone 2008, 2010; Belloni 2018a). Between these two poles, however, lies a wide continuum of social and economic conditions that reflects the plurality of migratory trajectories of the members of this

diaspora. Thanks to its historical and class stratification, gender balance and political variability, the Eritrean diaspora is indeed a highly differentiated community, where it is possible to find elders who experience very different conditions of aging. This internal plurality is also reflected in the limited number of people who can achieve the multiple criteria that members of the Eritrean diaspora elaborate to define and embody what they consider to be models of successful aging.

As the growing anthropological literature suggests (see, for instance, Rozanova 2010; Buch 2015; Lamb ed. 2017, Favi 2021; Scaglioni and Diodati 2021), these models are often the by-products of a neoliberal perspective that valorises individual efforts to defer, as long as possible, the vulnerabilities and decline associated with old age, thus depoliticizing and medicalizing the process of ageing to the point that a certain degree of stigmatization comes to be associated (particularly, but not only, in Western societies) with old age, physical and mental decline, and the related degree of dependency. How this Eurocentric, but highly globalized, framework resonates with – or is renegotiated by – the experiences of the members of the African diasporas is an important topic to address, which allows light to be shed on how people of different class, gender, age, origin, health conditions, and social capital link these models with the results achieved during their migratory trajectories, the network of relations they have been able to maintain with their contexts of origin, and the difficulties they face in terms of social and economic marginalisation in their host-countries.

After a short section providing the historical background of the Eritrean diaspora in Italy, this report will discuss the many intertwining criteria that members of this diaspora elaborate to define what successful aging means. Then, by addressing some life histories collected during fieldwork, the report will show that only a minority of the elders of the Eritrean diaspora can claim to have achieved all these criteria, while the great majority perceive their relative “failure” as a starting point for reflecting critically on the social and political factors that impacted negatively on their migratory trajectory.

1 The first lockdown of the whole of Italy started officially on 11th March 2020. From May to July of the same year containment measures were progressively loosened, but new restrictions were imposed again from October 2020 to March 2021.

2 http://dati.istat.it/Index.aspx?DataSetCode=DCIS_POP-STRCIT1# (accesso il 09/07/2021).



BACKGROUND

The Eritrean diaspora constitutes probably the oldest African community in Italy, and one of the most studied, despite its relatively small number of members.³ A few individuals of Eritrean origin already arrived in Italy during the years of Italian colonial occupation (1889-1941)⁴, but the first important wave of Eritrean migrants came during the 30-years-long Eritrean war of independence against Ethiopia (1961-1991)⁵. This first wave of migrants was characterised both by its gender balance (despite men and women often having very different working trajectories) and also by the crucial role it played in the economic and political support for the fight for independence (see, for instance, Pool 2001; Bernal 2004, Fessehatzion 2005; Arnone 2008; Poole 2013), which was led first by the Muslim-dominated Eritrean Liberation Front (ELF), founded in 1961, and then by the Eritrean People's Liberation Front (EPLF), a Marxist-Leninist movement which split from the ELF in 1975. These two political organisations had been in competition with each other to monopolise the liberation struggle as well to organise the economic support of the diaspora. Independence from Ethiopia was achieved under the banner of the EPFL, *de facto* in 1991, but *de jure* with the 1993 referendum.

Many of my oldest Eritrean interlocutors had been active EPLF supporters, sending important remittances for the liberation struggle and founding transnational associations to raise awareness among the European public (cf. Sorenson 1990). A few of them of them (generally male) were sent and paid by the EPLF precisely to organise the diaspora to this end. As Bernal (2004, 17-18), among others, has pointed out:

3 According to the 2019 report of ISTAT there are 8,773 Eritrean citizens in Italy, 2,264 of whom live in Lombardia. See http://dati.istat.it/Index.aspx?DataSetCode=DCIS_POPSTR-CIT1# (accessed 21/11/2019). Of course these data do not count the number of migrants who achieved Italian citizenship over time.

4 For a history of Eritrea under Italian colonial rule, see for instance: Taddia (1986); Negash (1987); Killion (1998); Henze (2000); Labanca (2007); Chelati Dirar (2007, 2018); Rosoni, Chelati Dirar (2012).

5 For a history of the war of Independence and the subsequent Eritrean-Ethiopian war, see for instance Ruth Lyob (1995, 2000, 2019); Negash and Tronvoll (2000); Reid, ed. (2009).

“The continuing importance of the diaspora for the state rests on a number of things. The majority of the estimated one million Eritreans living outside the country did not repatriate when Independence was won. It was clear that the war-torn new nation had no means of absorbing them and had few educational resources to offer their children [...] In addition families had been displaced and dispersed, and many communities had been destroyed so that some people had no close kin or community to return to in Eritrea. [...] The diaspora had contributed millions of dollars to Eritrea, not only in the form of remittances to family members, but also through taxes paid to the Eritrean state, donations [...], and funds sent to support Eritrea’s war effort in the 1998-2000 border conflict with Ethiopia”.

Indeed, the enthusiasm for Independence, which saw the rise of Isaias Afewerki (the leader of EPFL) as President of the Republic, was short-lived. In 1998 a border dispute with Ethiopia led to the Eritrean-Ethiopian war, which lasted two years, but a state of deep and continued tension continued between the two countries up until 2018. The economic crises provoked by the war and the authoritarian regime of Afewerki led to a second important wave of migration, composed of young people who tried to reach Europe to avoid forced conscription, the militarisation of society and the many abuses of the regime (Hedru 2003; Reid 2005; Kibreab 2009; Bozzini 2011; Müller 2012; Hirt and Mohammad 2013; O’Kane and Hepner (eds) 2013; Riggan 2016; Massa 2021). These internal policies, the lack of democratisation of the national sphere, and the infamous 2 percent “diaspora tax” that Eritreans abroad are often obliged to pay to support the regime (Hirt 2014) also split the members of the older diaspora along opposing political lines: while some continued to actively support the nationalist cause, others grew increasingly disillusioned and distanced themselves from the regime (Hepner 2003, 2015; Conrad 2006; Costantini 2012; Belloni 2018a, 2018b; Massa 2021).

This political divide also impacted on the perceptions the older members of the diaspora had of new migrants who came: those who still maintained their allegiance to the regime saw the newly arrived younger migrants as “traitors” to the

national cause and feared that this new wave of refugees could jeopardise the significant efforts of inclusion they had made in the host country. In this case, a generational divide overlapped with contrasting political positions, and younger migrants found it difficult to access the already established social networks of the diaspora for material and financial support (see, for instance, Costantini 2012; Fusari 2011), particularly after the refugee crisis of 2014 (Grimaldi 2016). By contrast, those who were more critical of the Eritrean regime were able to establish better links with the newly arrived migrants and, in some cases, they were able to contrast their political marginalisation inside the diaspora with a renewed role of “guide” and support for the younger ones.

This generational cleavage also had important implications in terms of class distinctions and opportunities for social mobility. The waves of Eritrean migrants who reached Italy in the 1960s and 1970s had comparatively more chance of finding good jobs and achieving permanent residential permits or Italian citizenship than the following waves, who found themselves increasingly marginalised, in terms of job opportunities as well as due to tighter restrictions in Italian immigration policies. This does not mean, however, that good opportunities were equally shared among first-wave migrants. Often women were less educated than men and found job opportunities mainly in the domestic sector, working as housemaids for upper middle-class Italian families that, in many cases, did not provide them with good salaries, formal contracts or chances for upward social mobility. Indeed, many of my female interlocutors of that generation lamented that their migratory trajectories had precluded the possibility of them achieving the social markers of successful ageing, while men were generally more able to embody at least a few of these markers thanks to their better working conditions.

ugee communities, which are split along not only political but also ethnic, religious, and regional lines. A variety of either ethnic-, region-, or religious-oriented associations attempt to organise the refugees by focusing on one of these diverse identities. Many refugees and even diaspora members feel lost in the existing patchwork of groups, networks, and organisations claiming to represent the interests and needs of Eritrean minorities abroad and serving as a tool to resist the Eritrean government from afar.”

And yet, despite the different ages, genders, class belongings, political and religious affiliations and life trajectories, my interlocutors generally agreed on the main criteria that defined a successful model of ageing in the diaspora. These criteria could be summarised under different, but often intertwined, points that surfaced – often together – during my conversations with members of the Eritrean diaspora:

Health Conditions: The first criterion mentioned by my interlocutors was often related to health. Many of my interlocutors stressed the importance of maintaining, for as long as possible, “a healthy body and a clear mind” to achieve what they considered ageing well, and to enjoy the best of what old age had to offer. Many of them, however, pointed out how economic and social factors, as well as the difficulties and stress faced during their migratory trajectories, could impact on health in old age. Every conversation related to health was immediately followed by reflection on the different factors that, according to them, produced a particular disease or on the importance of individual social networks to face and counter physical and mental decline. As Sahle⁶ (a 67-year-old woman who worked for thirty years as a domestic worker and is now living alone in a little apartment in Milan) stressed: “My arthrosis is the consequence of domestic work. I have spent my whole life with my hands in water, washing things for others. And now that I am old no-one does the same for me.” Past working conditions indeed took their toll on health and interpersonal relationships: for women who had worked as domestics it had been comparatively more difficult to marry and build their own families. Some of them found themselves alone



CRITERIA OF SUCCESSFUL AGEING

As Abdulkader Saleh Mohammad (2021) has pointed out:

“ [...] there is deep mutual mistrust among the various diaspora and ref-

⁶ Online Interview with Sahle, 28/03/2020.

in old age, without a kin network that could help them in case of ill health. For many of my interlocutors this epitomised the worst possible condition of ageing.

Economic Capital: As many of my interlocutors underlined, economic capital was a necessary precondition to build a path towards successful aging. Only a successful migratory trajectory, during which it was possible to find a permanent job that could guarantee a decent retirement, could lead to successful aging. Generally, this path was more open to those who had migrated during the 1960s and 1970s, when the Italian labour market was still able to absorb workers into permanent jobs, and easier for men than women. Financial success immediately translated into an important social position in their country of origin. Members of the diaspora who obtained good jobs have, for a substantial part of their lives, been the main source of remittances for kin and friends in Eritrea and have often been the main points of reference for migrants who arrived later. As Isaias⁷, a 68-year-old former employee of a trade company, pointed out: “I feel satisfied with my working life. With it I have not only built a family here, but I also helped those who stayed in Eritrea and those who arrived here later. Now that I am old, I can finally rest and spend my time with my friends and family, as any elder should do.”

Social Capital in Italy: A third, but crucial, criterion that defined what successful aging meant was the building of a family in Italy, with children and grandchildren who are economically independent and potentially able to help their elders in case of need. This is an important point, since becoming old in a diasporic context without having achieved the opportunity to have offspring not only exposes you to loneliness and social marginalisation but in many ways is socially perceived as a failure of your own individual trajectory: in other words, something to be ashamed of. In contrast, having children and grandchildren born in the host country provides a lot of opportunity to enlarge local social and cultural capital: many of my interlocutors stressed how important it was for them to have had children who went to school in Italy. The schooling of children helped parents to improve their Italian and build long-lasting friendly relationships with the Italian parents of their children’

schoolmates. For instance, Emnet⁸, a 68-year-old woman with three children born in Milan, remarked:

“Sending our children to school here allowed myself and my husband to have many Italian friends. We still spend time with the parents of some of our children’s schoolmates. They come here often to eat Eritrean food, and they invite us to their home to eat pizza or risotto. [...] We are getting old together and we talk mainly about health issues now. [...] Our eldest daughter and her sons live nearby and help us when we are in need. You cannot enjoy your old age if you are alone”.

Social and Political Capital and the Possibility of Transnational Aging: A fourth important criterion for being socially recognised as a successful elder of the diaspora was measured against the background of the positive relations maintained with relatives back in Eritrea and with other members of the diaspora (in Italy or elsewhere). This was reckoned in terms of the amount sent in remittances to the country of origin over time, the help provided to support the migratory trajectory of kin and friends in Europe, and the building of a new house in Eritrea, which testified at the same time to personal success, attachment to the country of origin, and the desire to eventually go back after retirement (Grimaldi 2019). The successful elder was thus someone who had been able to collect enough money to reinforce his/her link with the country of origin, was (potentially) able to spend part of the year in Eritrea (or at least take a trip there every few years) and had cultivated an active role both as the source of a chain of remittances as well as in the social, political, and religious life of the diasporic community where he/she lived. While a definitive return was not perceived as the best solution (due to the lack of medical services in Eritrea), many of my interlocutors saw spending a few months a year there and the rest in Italy as the better achievement of a migratory trajectory and of old age. The above-mentioned Isaias, for instance, was among the few who had had the chance to visit Eritrea regularly, and remarked how old age for him involved an increase of mobility: “when I was younger there was the war and I had

⁷ Interview online with Isaias, 12/04/2020.

⁸ Interview with Emnet, Milan, 11/11/2019.

to work a lot, I could not go there. Now I go back and forth at least every year. It's the privilege of old age." Of course, these trajectories of return migration or transnational aging depended not only on the social networks maintained with the country of origin, but also on positive political relations with the Eritrean government, which could allow or not members of the diaspora to spend part of the year there and part in Italy. Many of those who were more critical of the regime lamented the impossibility of return for political reasons, after a life spent building a new house there, sending remittances and helping the EPFL to achieve the control of the country. For them, the impossibility of visiting their country of origin implied both a strong sense of regret for the political condition of Eritrea as well as a feeling of not having fully realised what they had desired for the later part of their life.

EMBODYING SUCCESSFUL MODELS OF AGING

Few among my interlocutors had been able to achieve the above-mentioned criteria. Akile⁹, born in Asmara at the beginning of the 1950s, was one of them. His life history helps to highlight the factors facilitating the embodiment of a successful model of aging. Akile was the son of a couple of civil servants and in the 1970s he had the opportunity to go to study in the UK. As an active member of the EPFL, he was sent to Italy in the 1980s, spending some years in Bologna before moving to Milan, where he worked first in a restaurant and then for a trading company. In the 1990s he opened his own restaurant, married an Eritrean girl he had met in Milan and had three children, two of whom are now working in the USA. When I met him, he was quite proud of his own migratory trajectory both because over the years he has been able to send significant remittances to Eritrea, where he has built a couple of houses and given financial help to many family members (he said: "My job has helped many of my family members to study, get to the hospital and even to migrate"), as well as because he has employed in his restaurant a number of Eritrean immigrants in need. In particular, he boasted about the role that his restaurant had played in the improvement of Italian perceptions of African migrants. As he said:

"For me this restaurant is a way to let Italians know about our country and show them that Africans are not just criminals or refugees... we hold up the pride of our country... I told you before that I was part of the national liberation front ... Let's say that with this activity I continue to support my country in another way. ..."

One of the things that emerged from his words was the common fear of many older members of the diaspora to be re-included under the stigmatized category of "African migrant", even after they have spent so many years in Europe. Many other elders of Eritrean origin whom I met shared Akile's preoccupation and tried to put some distance between themselves and the new waves of migrants coming in, often depicting them as "traitors" to the national cause or as unruly youths that do not respect the elders of the diaspora any more and migrate only to enrich themselves, rather than helping the country as they, the elders, had done. Akile, who was a supporter of the Eritrean regime, was particularly trenchant on this point: "Young people coming from Eritrea now are not like us. We migrated because we loved Eritrea. They migrate because they hate it. They do not understand. They do not help the country and they do not respect us." Besides their opposing political positions, what seemed to concern Akile the most was the fact that younger members of the diaspora did not pay him and his generation enough respect. As the literature on aging in Africa has demonstrated (Aguilar 1998, 2000; Opong 2006; Van der Geest 1997, 2002; Coe 2019; Bellagamba 2013), the social and political privileges associated with elderhood in Africa are far from being uncontested; rather, they appear as an ever-changing arena of confrontation and struggle between different generations, and this holds true in the diaspora as well.

Despite their age and some minor health problems, Akile and his wife continued to work, but were also able to spend time in Eritrea. However, they did not want to come back indefinitely to their country of origin, first because they wanted to continue to give support to their children and grandchildren born in Italy, and second because they preferred to have access to the Italian health system. Akile thought of himself as having achieved the markers of successful aging, which in his opinion were directly linked to his successful migratory trajectory. He said:

⁹ Interview with Akile, Milan, 10/12/2018.

“To me becoming an elder means to be respected ... The elderly should be respected figures, because they have lived so long, they have so much experience, they have done so much for their children and grandchildren. To achieve this result you need to have enlarged your family, have done everything possible so that your children could study and feel good, have worked hard to leave them something ... and also have good health to be able to enjoy the fruits of all this work ... In my case, I achieved what I wanted ... and that is important ... because when you become old, it is important to feel that something has been achieved and to think that when you will no longer be there the people you love will be fine, because they have a job, they are okay and have no problems.”

What Akile did not mention, however, was that he started from a privileged position compared to many other migrants and that he was a strong supporter of the Eritrean government, and this political position helped him to attain the markers of a satisfactory elderly status. Indeed, the history of those who did not support the government was quite different. Adam¹⁰, for example, a retired man I met in Milan, had a relatively different idea of what it means to grow older in a diasporic context, even if his migratory trajectory was still a good one. He was born in 1951, and studied in Addis Ababa in the 1970s, where he began to participate in the struggle for Eritrean independence. He then went to France for a master's degree, and arrived in Italy in 1979 as an active member of the EPFL with the goal of organising the Eritrean community of Milan. He found a job as a construction worker, married an Eritrean girl and had two children. In the late 1990s he joined the ranks of the opposition and paid for this choice by losing any possibility of returning to his native country, where he had built a house. In the same period, he obtained Italian citizenship. He retired in 2018. When I asked him what it meant to get old in a diasporic context, he said that, despite his personal achievements, the political failure of his country was a matter of concern and regret that haunted him and overshadowed the feeling of satisfaction that he considered central to successful aging. While

¹⁰ Interview with Adam, Milan, 18/12/2018.

he was proud of the help he gave in the liberation struggle, he deeply regretted that Eritrea was still a dictatorship and “a country from which people escape”. The fact of being unable to go back because of his political opposition was for him the biggest source of pain. For him it was like having fought all his life for nothing. As he said:

“If you spend your life fighting for a cause and you do not achieve it, your old age is not as settled and calm as it should be. You feel like you have unfinished business to do, but you have neither the time nor the energy to achieve your desires.”



UNSUCCESSFUL MODELS

The feeling of regret regarding the political trajectory of their country of origin was shared by many of my interlocutors, spanning genders and class positions. Many old women whom I met, who had worked for years as domestics in Italy, complained about the diaspora tax they have been obliged to pay every year to their country of origin and the fact that they felt exploited and forgotten by the Eritrean government. Some of them were among those who had not achieved the markers of successful aging and struggled to make ends meet due to their small pensions and lack of family networks. Aging, for them, was a time of loneliness and isolation, immobility and regret, conditions that they faced by trying to create new relationships and directing fierce criticism towards the political and economic dynamics that had intersected to produce their social marginalization. Chikako Oza-wa-de Silva and Michelle Parsons (2020: 620) have pointed out how important it is to consider:

“[...] loneliness as an emergent relational process tied to social practices and places, themselves embedded in political economy, structural violence, and cultural expectations which are gendered, raced, and classed. The individualization and medicalization of loneliness runs the risk of eliding the historical, political, and economic circumstances that conspire to exclude individuals and communities from

meaningful social participation and social recognition. Anthropology significantly expands the study of loneliness and the range of possible interventions beyond the individual and beyond the clinic.”

Helen¹¹, for example, was born in 1944 in Tessenei, near the border with Sudan; her parents worked in the cultivation of cotton for the Italians during the colonial period. Thanks to his father’s contacts with some Italians, she managed to emigrate to Italy in the 1970s and worked as a maid for a rich family in Milan for 15 years, but without a formal, legal contract. Then she changed employers and continued to work until retirement in 2010. She was not married, she had no children, and she lived alone with a pension of around 900 Euros per month, since her first employers had not paid her social security contributions. When I asked her about the meaning of aging, she answered:

“It means having children and grandchildren who love you and help you ... but I ... my old age is different ... I didn’t think it would be like that when I was young ... when you are young you have other things to think about and you think you will be fine when you are old, you think you can rest ... and instead you never rest if you are alone ... If I could go back, I would marry ... I used to say: “I have to work; I have to work” ... and then it was too late ... and now I have no one with me.”

Helen had lost many of her family connections with Eritrea; given her salary she was not able to send remittances, and she had serious health problems. Going back to her country of origin, even for a period, was not an option for her. Indeed, the last time she had visited Eritrea was twenty years ago. However, she had a couple of friends, women of Eritrean origin who worked, like her, as housemaids, who occasionally helped her and visited her, and she also spent part of her time with an old Italian woman who lived alone in the same building. Loneliness, however, is what characterised her life, together with a feeling of “having thrown away her life”, as she said to me. Compared to the case of Akile, Helen was at the other end of the spectrum in terms of achieving or not the model of success-

ful aging, and her condition was shared by many of the former housemaids that I met and who have not been able to marry and have children. Many of them blamed their past working situations and the fact of having been exploited by their Italian employers, by the Eritrean government, and by their family networks in Eritrea which continued to consider them only as a source of remittances. They complained that all these actors forgot them once they were no longer productive, and this fear of being forgotten was a substantial part of their narrative of aging, as was the deep sense of loneliness and social exclusion. Their much-hated loneliness was, for them, a silent space filled with regrets and bittersweet memories. But it was also a space in which to reconsider critically the social, economic and political forces that had led them into exploitation, a condition that they actively tried to overcome by forging new social relations and by reframing what it meant to become old in the diaspora. Many of them, Helen included, cultivated a network of few but important friendly relationships among themselves and with lonely, retired, Italian women living in similar conditions. They helped each other to go shopping, to attend medical appointments, to while away the long hours of empty days. As Helen said:

“Luckily I have this friend living nearby. She is Italian, she is my age, and she is alone like me. We spend time together watching the TV, drinking tea, or simply chatting. We check every day whether we are still alive. It is our loneliness that made us friends. We discovered we have much in common, even if I come from Eritrea and she comes from Italy. Loneliness made us similar from many points of view and we spend our time discussing the many reasons why we find ourselves in this condition.”

The care and mutual support provided by these informal networks should not be underestimated. Dinsa¹² (71 years old) and Lydia¹³ (69 years old), for instance, are two retired domestic workers who often provide help to older Eritrean women in Milan. Both considered themselves lucky to have found good employers during their working lives, and to have had the chance of marrying and having

11 Interview with Helen, Milan, 10/01/2020.

12 Interview with Dina, Milan, 18/01/2019.

13 Interview with Lydia, Milan, 19/01/2019.

children. Both continued to stay in contact with other, less fortunate, former domestic workers and friends, animating a network of mutual support that involved financial help, food shopping, company during medical examinations, and frequent house visits to elderly women who lived alone and had health issues. As Dinsa said:

“We [the retired domestic workers] should help each other. We experienced the same working conditions; we walked the same paths from Eritrea to Italy; in some cases, we have been friends for more than forty years. Some among us have been luckier than others. The life of those who live alone, after all these sacrifices, is hard. Often, we are their only support, the only testimony they have that someone is caring for them and that their life means something to someone. You know, loneliness could be a terrible monster.”

The outbreak of the Covid19 pandemic and the related lockdowns severely limited these opportunities of mutual help, with dramatic consequences for many of these women who found themselves more alone than ever. As Helen said: “Covid has been the last nail in my coffin.”

CONCLUSIONS

Thanks to its internal variability, the Eritrean diaspora in Milan is a privileged place to explore how gender, class, and political affiliation intersected to produce successful or unsuccessful models and trajectories of aging. Contrary to neoliberal perspectives that see “successful aging” only as a matter of individual efforts and “entailing independence, busy activity, and agelessness as valued aspirations” (Lamb, ed. 2017:235), the analysis of life histories highlights the social, political, and economic factors that influence the attainment of the status of a respected and successful elder. Achieving the cultural markers of successful aging in a diasporic context relies heavily on the results of a migratory trajectory: a difficult goal for those whose social and economic capital was jeopardised during their lifetimes. Having had a good job that guaranteed a decent pension and stable economic position, having built a family in Italy, having helped kin and friends in Eritrea and having maintained positive

relations with the government, being in good health and emerging as a respected figure in the diasporic and intergenerational network of the diaspora: all these were not easy to achieve given the many forms of social marginalization that migrants had to face in Italy, and probably will be even more difficult in the future.

While a few Eritrean men came to embody the markers of successful aging, through their economic success, their ability to expand and support their transnational kin network, and maintaining good political connections with the Eritrean government, elderly women who worked as domestics and were not able to build their own families in Italy are considered to be on the other end of the spectrum, embodying in old age the failures of their migratory trajectories. And yet, their words testified not only to the forms of marginalization and the deep loneliness they experienced, but also to how their isolated state could become a platform on which it would be possible to forge new links and new social relations and expound powerful criticism against the power structures that affected their life trajectories. Forms of mutual care among former domestic workers, or between them and their elderly neighbours, become not only a way “to morally and practically recuperate social relations” (Buch 2015: 280), but also a space for collective political reflection among elderly women of similar financial backgrounds, a network that could transcend national belonging. Of course, the Covid pandemic has greatly reduced these forms of mutual help and deepened the sense of solitude of many of these elderly women. Being more than a simple biological process, aging in the diaspora embodies all the contradictions and ambiguities of the different, transnational paths forged by people during their life histories and the multiple efforts of members of the diaspora to cope with the inequalities produced by gender, class and political distinctions.

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