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Non-monetary Remittances of Egyptians Abroad

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Abstract

Migrants remit money, goods and commodities, as well as ideas and behaviors that affect sending countries, positively or negatively. It is not enough to study and track the flow of monetary remittances, which we admit its importance, but they also should give more attention to the study of the impact of socio-cultural remittances which may play an important role in reshaping societies. This study aims at exploring non-monetary remittances, and assesses their impact on Egypt.

Keywords: Non-monetary remittances; Egypt; socio-cultural remittances.

JEL Classification: F22, F24

Introduction

Migration from Egypt started in the late 1960s mainly for economic, but also for political reasons, with the large majority of the migrants going to the Gulf States. As early as the 1970s, the Egyptian state came to regard emigration as a means of easing pressure on the Egyptian labour market. From the 1980s onwards, migration has been regarded as a tool for development. The state further eased migration procedures to increase remittances necessary to supply payment deficits – a strategy that was successful. Remittances are among Egypt's largest source of foreign currency.

Remittances have long been in the focus of attention of studies dealing with the relationship between migration and development, both theoretically and empirically. Such flows of wealth are important not only to the sending country, but also to the families of migrants (Caldwell 1969). Egypt is one of the top 20 recipient countries of remittances worldwide and the top Arab world country in terms of expatriate remittances, estimated at about \$20bn annually (World Bank 2016).

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Migrants remit money, goods and commodities, as well as ideas and behaviors that affect sending countries, positively or negatively. Levitt calls these kinds of remittances “social remittances”: “Social remittances are the ideas, behaviors, identities, and social capital that flow from receiving- to sending- communities” (Levitt, 1998:927). She further identifies three types of social remittances; normative structures (ideas, values, and beliefs), systems of practice (actions shaped by normative structures), and social capital (Levitt, 1998). This study aims at exploring non-monetary remittances, and assesses their impact on Egypt.

Egyptians abroad

Different estimates are found for the number of Egyptians abroad. While national estimates push the number of Egyptians abroad up to eight million, the United Nations estimates of Egyptians abroad downsize the number to 3.2 million in 2015 (United Nations 2016). Author's estimates of Egyptians abroad are a middle way between the national and international estimates at a level of 4.4 million. According to author's estimates, one can notice that Egyptian migration is mainly labor migration to Arab countries with more than 75% of Egyptians abroad are based in the Arab Gulf countries and other Arab countries. Saudi Arabia, Jordan, Kuwait, the United Arab Emirates (UAE), Libya, and Qatar are the main destinations of Egyptians in the Arab region.

Egyptians in the non-Arab countries comprise less than 25% of Egyptians abroad. The United States of America, Canada, Italy, The United Kingdom (UK), Australia, Greece, France, Germany, Austria, and Netherlands are the main destinations of Egyptians abroad out of the Arab region.

Non-monetary remittances (socio-cultural remittances)

One should not ignore the interaction between migration and globalization and the role that diaspora networks play in enhancing cross-border flows of goods, capital, and knowledge (Rapoport 2016). Globalization, made possible by new communication and information technologies and increased mobility, has spread new and different types of consumption patterns. In remote villages in the Nile Delta and Upper Egypt, one can notice the increasing number of satellite dishes attached to television sets that bring international channels to these households and influence their behavior and perception of migration. In this section I explore the impact of migration on selected aspects of the Egyptian society; mainly the dress code of Egyptians, their religious practice as well as the *Gulfanization* of the public sphere.



In Egypt, the media stigmatize returnees from the Arab Gulf Countries as importers of consumerism and conservative religious and gender norms and a means to spread cultural values from abroad (Gruntz and El-Karoui, 2013).

Since most of Egyptian migrants heading to the Arab Gulf countries are males who leave their families behind, other family members take over migrants' responsibilities in the country of origin, such as agricultural work. The husband's absence forces women to manage alone which makes for woman empowerment (Brink 1991; Zohry 2002). In contrast, migration to the origin of Wahhabism in the Kingdom of Saudi Arabia, for example, affected the Egyptian society and reproduced a new version of social and theological behavior. This behavior might have increased the tendency to fundamentalism, as well as the marginalization of women in society. More focus is given in the following analysis to the impact of migration on the dress code of Egyptians, their religious practice as well as the *Gulfanization* of the public sphere.

The dress code and migration

The typical dress of Egyptian males in rural areas is the *Jellabiya*; the *Jellabiya* is a traditional Egyptian garment. It differs from the Arabian *Thobe* in that it has a wider cut, no collar (in some case on buttons) and longer, wider sleeves. In case of farmers, these sleeves can be very wide. *Jellabiya* colors are often dark. Tan or striped fabrics are used. The Egyptian *Jellabiya* is made of cotton or linen; suitable to the hot and wet weather in Egypt and made of national materials. With the massive migration to the Gulf countries in the mid 1970s, Egyptians started to introduce the *Khaliji – Arab Gulf – Jellabiya* with them. The top of the *Khaliji Jellabiya* is almost the same as the Western classic shirts; with tight sleeves and a collar. This *Jellabiya* comes usually in a single color; white. Moreover, this *Jellabiya* is made of polyester – usually 70 percent polyester and 30 percent cotton. The *Khaliji Jellabiya* became a prominent item in the baggage of the return migrants from the Gulf for their own use and also as a gift for family members, relatives and friends.

Despite the fact that this type of dress is not suitable for humid, dusty, and hot weather in Egypt, the use of this dress became almost universal. Males, not only in rural areas but also in urban, replaced their traditional dress with this imported *Jellabiya*. In addition, *Jellabiya* replaced the Western Pajama in urban areas and became the main dress at home for males. The most important motive for males to shift from the traditional Egyptian *Jellabiya* to the *Khaliji Jellabiya* is the claimed connection between this *Jellabiya* and Islam. Since the white dress has a connection with Islam as the preferred color and since

many Muslims wear the color white when they attend Friday prayers, and given the fact that this dress comes from Saudi Arabia, the country in which the Muslim holy land is located, this imported dress acquired a religious legacy to replace the national *Jellabiya*.

When Egyptian males migrated to the Gulf countries and associated with the white dress for males they have seen there, they found that women in these destinations are wearing black and fully covered. Because they don't have a strong contact with the society, Egyptian migrants regarded this dress as the standard Muslim dress and made for importing this dress as well to complete the "Black and White" picture. This tendency was associated with the relief of pressure against Islamic Movements at the time of Sadat after a long ban at Nasser era. The Bedouin black robe replaced the traditional rural women's dress and extended to include all segments of the society. It's important to mention here that the Bedouin robe replaced the Western-styled women's dress in urban not only for religious reasons but sometimes due to economic reasons since Bedouin robes are almost similar and can be worn many times without the need for having many of them compared to the Western dress which assumes maintaining a set of different styles and colors for different occasions and to show high social status.

Nowadays, nearly all women in Egypt, whose population is 90% Muslim, wear a *veil*. Some women prefer a *hijab*, which covers the hair only; others a *niqab*, which leaves only a slit for the eyes; but few appear in public sphere unveiled (The Economist 2015). Amin (2003) noticed that almost all female graduate students in the 1950 were not wearing *Hijab*. He reported also that almost all female graduate students on eve of the third millennium appeared with *hijab*.

Muslims, but not Islam

"I went to the West and saw Islam, but no Muslims; I got back to the East and saw Muslims, but not Islam," Muhammad Abduh. This quote by Muhammad Abduh (1849-1905), an Egyptian jurist, religious scholar (Grand Mufti of Egypt) and liberal reformer, regarded as the founder of Islamic Modernism who concluded his visit to Europe by this quote, explains it all; the return migration of males who spent years in Saudi Arabia brought with them a strict practice code of Islam mixed with the harsh Bedouin culture to a tolerant agricultural society (Zohry 2007). The result is an increase of practice and less tolerance. Moreover, theological leaders who follow the Wahabi thoughts after their migration to Saudi Arabia and their return to Egypt attracted a significant proportion of people in Egypt. In addition, they established their own TV channels and started to widespread their strict thoughts among their followers. It's noticeable of course that the new



theological leaders are not graduates of Al-Azhar University, and many of them didn't study Islam in specialized schools. In addition, they don't wear the Al-Azhar formal dress but they dress the same as the Wahabi theological people in Saudi Arabia (Zohry 2012).

With the ease of communications and the new media, these theological leaders became society stars; the same as cinema stars and football players. They managed to have thousand and millions of fans in the new (social) media – Facebook and Twitter – and their photos – despite the fact that they deny the legitimacy of photographing human body – replaced the wallpapers of famous singers and movie stars in the mobile phones and computer screens. In addition, quotes of their TV programs became mobile phones ringtones; an excessive dose of religious behavior without a socioeconomic development impact (Lotfy, 2005).

This excessive dose of religious behavior resulted in a sectarian strife; not only between Muslims and Christians who were living together for hundreds of years, but also among Muslims themselves. Muslims were divided into sects according to their practice, not their beliefs. Now, Egyptian Muslims are divided into Salafi (almost Wahabies), Sufi, Sunni (Mainly belongs to Al-Azhar), liberals and many other sects. After 200 years of the foundation of modern Egypt as a Nation State, social discourse now is driven from equal citizenship rights to the foundation of a religious state.

Gulfanization of the Public Sphere

For a long time, Egypt is well known as the head of the cultural body of the Arab culture. With more than 3,000 movies in about 100 years, radio and media production, literature, well-known singers, musicians and composers, Egyptian universities, and Egyptian teachers in Arab countries, Egypt managed to Egyptianize the Arab cultural sphere from the Arab/Persian Gulf to the Atlantic Ocean. Because of these efforts and soft tools, Egyptian Colloquial language is widely understood and highly appreciated all over the Arab region. Nowadays, and due to migration and return migration, a strange culture that comes from the Arab Peninsula started to compete with the long-standing culture of Egyptians; not only artisticwise but also religion-wise (Zohry, 2006).

The sharp sounds of Saudi Quraan reciters managed to push away the traditional Egyptian Quraan reciters such as Abdelbasset Abdelsamad and Mohamed Refaat. More over, the Music TV channels founded and paid for by Khaliji businessmen invaded the Egyptian media sphere. Not only media, but also the Egyptian cuisine have been affected by imported behavior and Khaliji restaurants in

Cairo became an integral part of the food business in the capital of Egypt. With respect to shopping, malls and main shopping streets became full of shops that sell the *Khaliji* Bedouin robes. With respect to books, the bestseller books in the last *Cairo Book Fair* that took place in January 2016 were almost religious books that come from publishing houses in Saudi Arabia and their affiliates in Cairo. Books were all about strict Wahabi practices, mainly related to women, hijab, and niqab. The books currently available for sale in bookshops specialized in selling Islamic books are usually cheaper than the cost of the materials used to produce them, which means that they are subsidized, not by the Egyptian government of course.

Conclusion

An attempt was made in this study to shed light on non-monetary remittances of Egyptians abroad. Studies on the relationships between migration and development in Egypt tend to quantify this relation by focusing on economic aspects of remittances and their effects at the macro- and microeconomic levels. A few studies investigated the socio-cultural effects of migration and their societal impact; future studies should shed some light on such issues.

The topic of socio-cultural remittances is severely under researched; researchers should devote more effort to study the impact of socio-cultural remittances on sending countries. It is not enough to study and track the flow of monetary remittances, which we admit its importance, but they also should give more attention to the study of the impact of socio-cultural remittances which may play an important role, negative or positive, in reshaping societies. The conclusion to be drawn from the analysis carried out in this article is the fact that financial remittances are usually associated with socio-cultural remittances. The case of Egypt indicates that while the impact of financial remittances is positive, the impact of socio-cultural remittances is generally negative.

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