

This study investigates how interreligious dialogue contributes to improving the labour market participation of migrant Muslim women (MMW) in Italy. Central to this analysis is the application of a relational approach of Pierpaolo Donati, which emphasises the value of social bonds in processes of integration. Through an assessment of the activities of the Community of Sant'Egidio, a faith-based organisation committed to fostering intercultural and interfaith dialogue, the research highlights how such initiatives can address the cultural and social barriers encountered by MMW when obtaining employment in Italy.

Italy, the setting of this research, has increasingly developed into a multicultural society due to migratory flows. Nevertheless, despite the significant economic and social contributions made by migrants and refugees, they frequently encounter systemic barriers to full inclusion, particularly within the European context. Statistical data from Eurostat (2023) and ISTAT (2021) reveal persistent inequalities in obtaining employment between EU nationals and non-EU migrants (IDOS 2022; 2023). ISTAT data from 2021 reveals that an overwhelming 87% of EU migrants and 91.2% of non-EU migrants face discrimination primarily due to their foreign origins and religious beliefs. This stark contrast with the native Italian population, where only 5.6% experience discrimination for similar reasons, highlights a significant and deeply rooted bias. Among these, MMW face more challenges, as they are often subject to intersecting forms of discrimination linked to both their gender and religious identity.

Previous research on labour market discrimination has shown that visible religious symbols, such as the hijab, frequently provoke biased responses from employers, thereby reducing employment opportunities for MMW and leading to their social exclusion (European Union Agency for Fundamental Rights, 2016). These patterns of structural discrimination underline the need for innovative approaches that address the root causes of such biases (OECD, 2023). While previous studies have offered important insights into discrimi-

nation mechanisms, they have largely overlooked the role that interreligious dialogue and intercultural mediation might play in countering exclusion and promoting economic integration. This study aims to address that gap by considering this issue through the lens of Pierpaolo Donati's relational approach, which lays grounding for an integration model grounded in respectful friendly and trustful social relationships.

The Relational Approach of Pierpaolo Donati

Donati's relational paradigm offers a nuanced understanding of cultural difference by distinguishing among three interpretive models: *dialectic*, *binary*, and *relational*. The dialectic model frames difference as a provisional space for negotiation, while the binary model tends to reinforce rigid oppositions that lead to exclusion. In contrast, the relational model perceives cultural difference as a meaningful distance that, when approached through dialogue and mutual engagement, enables the co-construction of shared identities and social realities. This perspective directly underpins the present study's aim of fostering inclusion through interreligious dialogue, moving beyond polarised views to promote exchanges that integrate MMW's cultural and religious identities into broader societal fabric (Donati 2015).

Central to this paradigm is the concept of *relational reasoning*, which views individuals as embedded within social networks rather than as isolated. Applied to the labour market, this approach highlights the importance of nurturing interpersonal connections that respect cultural diversity, thereby reframing employment not merely as an economic arrangement but as a mutual, socially embedded commitment. Donati further elaborates the concept of *relational goods* (Donati 2013), non-material benefits rooted in social interactions, which extend beyond traditional definitions of public, private,

collective or common goods (Wagner 1992; Ostrom 1990). The Community of Sant'Egidio exemplifies this through programmes that facilitate intercultural exchange, language learning, and vocational development in environments that create interpersonal friendly relations and reduce employment barriers.

The Golden Rule

The Golden Rule, often summarized as "treat others as you would like to be treated," is a universally recognized ethical principle present across many religious, philosophical, and cultural traditions. While the specific phrasing may differ, the core idea remains the same: it emphasizes mutual respect and the ethical treatment of others by encouraging empathy and reciprocity in human interactions. The Golden Rule appears also in Christianity, where it is stated, "Do unto others as you would have them do unto you" (Matthew 7:12), and Islam, which asserts, "None of you truly believes until he loves for his brother what he loves for himself" (Muslim Ibn Al-Hajjaj, Book 1, Hadith 72), demonstrating its foundational role across diverse ethical approaches (Wattles 1996).

This reciprocal relational ethic resonates not only at the local level but also with broader international policy frameworks. The United Nations General Assembly's resolution A/RES/75/26 on the promotion of interreligious and intercultural dialogue, understanding, and cooperation for peace (2020) underscores the critical importance of fostering environments that facilitate meaningful exchanges between diverse cultures and religions. By enhancing mutual understanding and strengthening social bonds, it aims to underpin cohesive societies through relational dynamics.

Within the activities of the Community of Sant'Egidio, this principle serves as a moral foundation, informing a consistent commitment to justice, respect, and human dignity. The implementation of the

The Role of Interreligious Dialogue in the Labor Market Inclusion of Migrant Muslim Women in Italy: The Case of the Community of Sant'Egidio

Olena Komisarenko

Golden Rule in interreligious initiatives underscores the ethical dimension of relational engagement, aligning closely with the research objective of understanding how dialogue can foster inclusive and equitable labour market participation.

The Methodology and Key Outcomes

Donati's The empirical foundation for this research is 2 months of fieldwork carried out together with MMW who had just arrived in Italy and were attending the course called "Economia domestica". The first part of the syllabus of this course is dedicated to the Mediterranean diet and to the cultural particularities of food consumption in Italy. This data collection technique provided information about how the Community of Sant'Egidio creates space for building relationships which foster the understanding of others as they understand themselves in questions related to culture and which are not always logical and can be only explained by cultural traditions and religious beliefs which shape one's daily lifestyle.

The depth and richness of life story data can help in understanding the way the lives of refugees changed after they contacted the Community of Sant'Egidio. Hence, a biographical data collection technique, which encourages the MMW to tell their life stories for capturing that the dynamics of acculturation from a long-term perspective has value. Therefore, 13 semi-structured interviews were conducted with the participants presented in Table 1.

The Community of Sant'Egidio promotes intercultural and interreligious engagement through various initiatives such as language courses, vocational training, and inclusive celebrations that acknowledge and respect participants' cultural and religious identities. The findings identified key areas where MMW require adaptation for practical reasons to integrate effectively into the Italian workforce, such as:

- Clothing
- Food consumption
- Prayer times
- Observance of religious holidays

Support in navigating these areas through education and mediation was shown to improve participants' opportunities for stable employment. Participants in the study, such as Nelly and Fatima, described difficult choices between

	Pseudonym	Country of origin	Age	Profession
1	Nelly	Afghanistan/Iran	28	Tailor
2	Sabrina	Somalia	56	Nurse
3	Sara	Afghanistan	34	Project Manager
4	Mary	Afghanistan	27	Journalist
5	Caterina	Syria	29	Mediator
6	Fatima	Tunisia	41	Cleaner
7	Manar	Palestine/Syria	40	Cook
8	Sahira	Palestine/Syria	57	Cleaner
9	Arigato	Morocco	60	Mediator
10	Narisa	Palestine/Syria	29	Mediator
11	Alba	Iran	43	Baby-sitter
12	Ameera	Afghanistan	19	Baby-sitter
13	Karima	Afghanistan	20	Mediator

maintaining religious practices and securing employment, highlighting the real-life dilemmas that arise in the absence of interreligious understanding. Nelly, a refugee from Afghanistan who was born in Iran, in her interview shared that once she declined a job offer because the working hours were overlapping with her prayer times and she was shy to ask about a possibility of breaks from work for prayers. Nelly currently works in the clothes department of a warehouse at the "Citta Ecosolidale" of the Community of Sant'Egidio.

Fatima from Tunis recounted a challenging situation where her adherence to wearing the hijab led to a change in em-

ployment. When her daughter was just a year old, she took up a cleaning job at an esthetic center for economic reasons, working twice a week. Initially, her employer questioned her if wearing the hijab was obligatory, but the employer, knowing about the fact that it was essential to her, still hired her. Subsequently, after nearly two weeks, Fatima was informed that to retain her job, she would need to remove the hijab or replace it with a sanitary cap. Fatima chose to uphold her religious practice and consequently left the job. Currently her work is predominantly in the cleaning sector in collaboration with Community of Sant'Egidio.

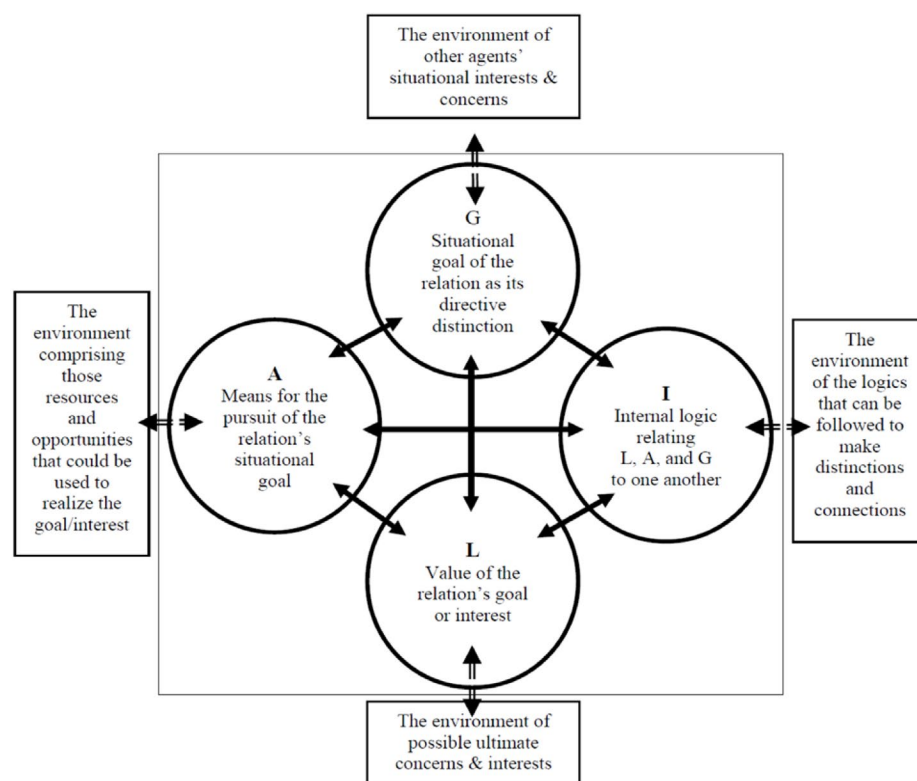


Figure 2: The AGIL scheme

AGIL Scheme

Donati analyse the role of interreligious dialogue in facilitating the socio-economic inclusion of MMW, this study draws on Pierpaolo Donati's adaptation of Talcott Parsons' AGIL framework (Parsons 1951). Donati reinterprets the four systemic functions – Adaptation, Goal Attainment, Integration, and Latency – through a relational lens as in Figure 1 (Donati 2022, 33; 2023), that can be directly applied to the processes through which faith-based initiatives can support inclusive labour market participation.

By disaggregating the contributions of the Community of Sant'Egidio along these four dimensions (Adaptation, Goal Attainment, Integration, and Latency), the research clarifies how interfaith engagement, conceptualised as a relational good, contributes to the empowerment and economic independence of MMW in Italy.

Adaptation (A): This function considers how the Community of Sant'Egidio enables MMW to adjust to their new environment by offering essential resources and guidance, thereby improving access to employment. For example:

- The Community's Italian language course, "L'Italiano per Amico", is designed specifically for migrants and refugees. It focuses on relevant vocabulary and grammar and fosters a safe, inclusive learning space. This instruction incorporates practical themes from daily life and the workplace, equipping MMW with the skills needed for job readiness and social participation.
- The "Economia domestica" course further exemplifies relevant support. It covers essential skills related to household management and the culture of food preparation and consumption in Italy, that are necessary for women who are going to work in Italian families or service sector.
- Volunteer assistance plays a vital role in socio-economic inclusion. Volunteers help MMW navigate bureaucratic systems, access healthcare, and better understand Italian workplace culture. Their unpaid commitment reflects a deep relational ethic rooted in mutual care rather than transactional relationships.

These examples show how adaptation enables MMW to overcome barriers to socio-economic participation through

both relational and practical support, preparing them to engage meaningfully with the labour market.

Goal Attainment (G): This function focuses on achieving personal and professional objectives that foster stability, self-reliance, and purpose. The employment of migrants and refugees plays a critical role in their process of inclusion for several reasons. Firstly, it fosters *economic stability* by providing autonomy and financial independence, which are essential for their integration into host communities. With economic stability, migrants and refugees experience a reduction in dependency on state welfare systems and charitable organizations, experiencing a sense of self-sufficiency and dignity. Employment also facilitates *skill utilization and development*, allowing migrants and refugees to apply their existing abilities while acquiring new ones. Having a steady job contributes to a sense of identity and purpose, which is vital for acculturation, as it enables individuals to feel valued and recognized as contributing members of society.

- Sabrina works as a nurse and volunteers with the Community as an expression of her *zakat*, which emphasizes charity and service in Islam. Her words: "You don't have to be someone, you have to do something for someone," reflect her alignment of personal values with professional goals. This example shows how MMW are achieving not only economic independence but also fulfilling personal and religious goals, demonstrating that interreligious dialogue aligns practical employment support with deeply held cultural values.

Integration (I): In our context, considering the value MMW contribute to the host country if employed, their legal employment should be seen as a goal, while the availability of volunteers from the Community to assist PSFM and the resources the Community can dedicate to supporting this assistance can serve as a means favoring the employment process. All these elements can work together effectively only if they are based on a friendly reciprocal interaction that is supported by interreligious dialogue and intercultural mediation.

Without these linking and facilitating relations, held together by interreligious

dialogue, the social problems of discrimination, hostility and unemployment are difficult to be resolved. During participant observation of the activities of the Community of Sant'Egidio, the importance of a variety of informal events that were aimed at building friendship and social cohesion was affirmed. Most of them were of the interreligious or intercultural character like celebrations of religious holidays or dedicated to promotion values rooted in all the religions, such as peace. The Community celebrates major religious and cultural holidays, such as Ramadan and Eid, alongside other interfaith gatherings. For example:

- Arigato, an intercultural mediator working in Rebibbia prison who participated in the research, first encountered the Community during Eid al-Fitr, where the organization provided festive meals and involved an Imam to facilitate a culturally appropriate celebration. These interactions encourage both personal friendships and a sense of belonging in the host community.

Latency (L): The most significant result is that all interviewed women were willing to contribute to the host community through their work thanks to the trust and friendship established by the Community. They tend to take up professions in service and care sector, and moreover volunteer to help the other migrants and refugees. This is evidenced by:

- Narisa from Syria has been employed as an operator at the hospitality center of the Red Cross Italy. She is glad that her employment involves aiding others. She acknowledges that her own experiences as a refugee have endowed her with a profound understanding of the needs of those in similar circumstances.
- Karima from Afghanistan works as an intercultural mediator, assisting migrants and refugees, especially those with serious health problems. She supports them through job searches and interviews, facilitating integration while drawing on her own cultural knowledge.
- Ameera from Afghanistan fulfils part-time civil service at the kindergarten taking care of little children. As a volunteer Ameera helps at the center of the Community of Sant'Egidio. She said: "Every Tuesday I volunteer for Sant'Egidio. I help



others in need. I go to the center every Tuesday afternoon to distribute food packs. I like that a lot. That all the people there are equal and are treated equally”

The integration of MMW into the labour market is significantly enhanced when their identity is respected and their participation encouraged. The Latency function illustrates how interfaith dialogue supports the desire among MMW to contribute in sectors such as care, service, education, and voluntary support. Their professional roles, shaped by cultural experience and ethical values, demonstrate that integration and identity preservation are not only compatible but mutually reinforcing.

In conclusion, by applying the relational approach and the AGIL scheme to a real-life example, this study demonstrates that interreligious dialogue functions as a relational good, that significantly enhances labour market inclusion of MMW and created their willingness to contribute to the host community. This model reveals the transformative capacity of relational interfaith and intercultural initiatives, showing how such practices can mitigate both structural and social obstacles to inclusion and, ultimately, enable MMW to engage more fully and meaningfully in the labour market. The Community of Sant'Egidio exemplifies this approach, offering not just practical assistance but a transformation in how migrant integration is relational-

ly conceived, moving towards inclusive, resilient, and cohesive communities that embrace diversity.

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