Romanian transnational families: insights from a qualitative study on care workers

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Abstract

Purpose – An increasing number of international immigrant workers enter the EU labour market to fill the gap in many key economic sectors. Labour migration often implies a process of family adaptation and, in some cases, a breakdown in the community structure and networks. This study aims to provide insights into the dynamics of transnational families, focusing on changes in the redefinition of roles within family members and children care arrangements.

Design/methodology/approach – The study was based on the analysis of 12 biographical interviews conducted using semi-structured interviews between November 2018 and December 2019 among Romanian women who worked as caregivers in families in an Italian metropolitan city and the surrounding urban area.

Findings – Despite the economic dimension being essential, psychological well-being increasingly burdens workers’ migratory experience and that of their family members. Findings suggest including employers and children among the actively involved actors of the family decision-making process; working and contractual conditions as factors that significantly impact the opportunities and capability of workers to provide and receive care, mainly if the latter are employed in the informal market.

Originality/value – The study makes it possible to highlight that the dynamics in decision-making processes in transnational families change in the different phases of the migration project and involve numerous actors. These processes are not always rational and are strongly influenced by the labour market structure in which migrants are employed.

Keywords Migration, Transnationalism, Family issues, Labour market, Romania, Qualitative analysis

Paper type Research paper

Introduction

In recent decades, international migration flows have experienced a significant increase and catalysed scholars’ attention not only to the economic consequences and their impact on the labour market but also on their social effects. Regarding this latter dimension, issues related to transnational families, children left behind and care drain became relevant. In some sectors of the western countries’ labour market, particularly that of care, there is a growing feminisation of flows, where women migrants often deal with a care dilemma. On the one hand, their work implies that they must take care of and help the families for whom they work, but on the other hand, their migratory choice takes them away from their families of origin to whom they deny, with their absence, their time and care (Ehrenreich and Hochschild, 2002; Tosi, 2020). Accordingly, care migration triggers care erosion, which leads to the vulnerability of left behind, such as children and the elderly (COFACE – Confederation of Family Organizations in the European Union, 2012; Pries, 2022; Matei and Bobărnat, 2021). Following migration, frequently family becomes transnational where geographical distance implies reorganisation, transformation of parents–children relationship, changing roles and renegotiation of extended family solidarity (Vianello, 2014; Pantea, 2012; Madianou and Miller, 2012) as well as, in some cases, a breakdown in the community structure and networks (see, among others, UNICEF, 2008; Boccagni, 2010; Mazzucato and Schans, 2011; Bélorgey et al., 2012).
This work explores and describes migration’s impact on transnational families of women working in the care sector in Italy. The investigation focuses on the outcomes of family structure and stability, the redefinition of roles within family members, family arrangement, on the management and care of children. To this end, the Romanian community was considered, as it is among the largest group of care workers in Europe, with particular attention to female home-based caregivers, and selecting Italy as the destination country as the latter represents the top destination for Romanian migrants in the EU (Eurostat, 2021). With the collapse of the Communist regime, in fact, the Romanian population escaped from a context of high levels of unemployment and widespread poverty, generating one of the most consistent international flows of labour emigration, often irregular and circular (see among others, Sandu, 2010; Baldwin-Edwards, 2005; Horváth, 2008; Alexe et al., 2012; Anghel et al., 2016). The emigration of ethnic groups characterised the first wave, and Germany was one of the leading destination (but also transit) countries, along with Hungary. Later, Romanians moved to France, Belgium, Italy, Spain and the UK (Bleahu, 2004; Anghel, 2008; Cingolani and Piperno, 2006). Italy has always been a privileged destination for several reasons: the historical presence of Italians in Romania and the growing number of Italian investors since the first years of post-regime economic transition; the role of the Catholic Church, which supported the first flows of emigration (Ban, 2009; Jacob, 2014; Alexe et al., 2012; Anghel et al., 2016); and its informal economy that has often allowed the irregular entry into the labour market (Reyneri and Fullin, 2010; Mara, 2012; Ambrosini, 2015). Moreover, the Italian care sector – characterised by a family welfare system – has greatly demanded female workers (Vianello, 2014). With the abolition of controls in the Schengen area in 2002 and the subsequent accession of Romania to the European Union in 2007, the mobility of Romanian citizens has exponentially increased, and it has become less selective, with a growing share of mature women (AIIR-CR, 2020). In Romania, at least one-third of the country’s population has been abroad for at least six months in the past 30 years (Anghel et al., 2016). Data on temporary migration count that 2,577,656 people have experienced in 2008–2018 a migratory experience abroad not exceeding 12 months (INS – Institutul Național de Statistică, 2019).

The study is based on the analysis of 12 biographical interviews conducted using semi-structured interviews between November 2018 and December 2019 among Romanian women who worked as caregivers in families in an Italian metropolitan city and the surrounding urban area. The collected information allowed us to describe the experience of this group of women and their families during the different phases of their migratory project. The choices of women workers imply changes over time in the structure and management of the family of origin in a context of interdependence between the individual and familial dimensions.

The article first discusses the main theoretical frameworks that deal with migration and transnationalism, then presents an empirical review. The latter allows us to highlight the key factors and significant implications for transnational households related to their structure, stability and general well-being. Secondly, the article presents the most important findings of the biographical analysis to discuss the possible consequences at the individual, family and social levels on transnational families of migrant workers in the care sector.

**Care workers: between migration and transnationalism**

New economic theories of migration have been among the first to drive the attention of researchers on the role of the family (Massey et al., 1993). As Glick (2010) highlights, there is migration selectivity within the household, a process through which it is decided who migrates and who stays. Networks act on the self-propulsive nature of migration (Massey et al., 1993) and provide migrants with access to information, material and social support (see for a review, Chi, 2020). Migration can also undermine the stability of the family. However, the timing of family events is often unknown, and it makes difficult to establish the
direction of the cause-and-effect relationship between migration and union dissolution (see for a review, Glick, 2010; Flowerdew and Al-Hamad, 2004; Muszynska and Kulu, 2006; Boyle et al., 2008; Caarls and Mazzucato, 2015).

Theoretical developments often adopt a multilevel approach to include several levels of analysis, and a life course perspective to account for changes that migrants face across their migrational experience (Castells and Miller, 1993; Kulu and Milewski, 2007; Glick, 2010; Kley, 2011; Wingers et al., 2011; Edmonston, 2013). With the intensification of labour international migration flows and the increasingly frequent adoption by workers of temporary and circular migration projects, some researchers introduced the concept of “liquid migration” to describe this phenomenon (Engbersen et al., 2010). In this context of high mobility, workers are constantly moving, and they adapt their projects to the demand and needs of the labour market. These dynamics, together with the limitations imposed by the mobility rules for certain groups of migrants, often lead to transnationalism, which considers migration a bi-multidirectional phenomenon, where individual trajectories develop within family dynamics connected to supranational networks (Glick Schiller et al., 1992; Portes et al., 1999; Parreñas, 2001, 2005; Baldassar et al., 2016; Pries, 2022).

According to the definition given by Bryceson and Vuorela (2002, p. 18), transnational families are:

Families that live some or most of the time separated from each other, yet hold together and create something that can be seen as a feeling of collective welfare and unity, namely familyhood, even across national borders.

Transnational families are therefore characterised by the continuity of relations and the status of dependency between the different members, where the circulation of care is central, but it also involves social practices that are exercised at a distance (Boccagni, 2009; Baldassar et al., 2016). Field research has identified three main types of transnational families: circular, intergenerational and puerocentric (Ambrosini, 2005). According to this classification, transnational circular families involve adult and mature mothers with children of different ages who frequently return home. Conversely, the presence of grown-up children characterises intergenerational families, and visits are rare as the migration project is oriented to return home. While, in puericentric families, despite having minor children, migrants rarely visit them but instead aim at a reunion in preparation for a stabilisation in the destination country.

Transnational families are fluid and complex to analyse, and not all migrants have the same degree of freedom and opportunities, which are influenced by laws, political rules, labour market structure, access to digital media and cultural and social customs (Glick, 2010; Skrbiš, 2008). Moreover, not all migrants can optimise the available resources to support caregiving, which, according to Merla and Baldassar (2011), include mobility, communication, social relations, time allocation, education and knowledge, paid work and appropriate housing. The type of migration project and care practices are highly heterogeneous among migrants according to their origin and the type of caregiving relationship (Ambrosini, 2005; Baldassar et al., 2016; Mazzucato and Dito, 2018).

In parallel with the growing feminisation of migration flows, there is an increasing interest in the issue of gender in migration studies, and this variable also becomes part of the theoretical framework for transnational families (Christou and Kofman, 2022). In these cases, researchers deal with transnational motherhood, which focuses on possible changes and adjustments in the economic sphere, the responsibilities of circular care and solidarity and family welfare (Matei and Bobărat, 2022). When women migrate and they are culturally and socially the only ones considered as able to provide adequate care to other family members, their absence affects family relations, the power gender structure, leading to rewriting the parental role, identities, emotional ties and relationship (Boccagni, 2010; Bryceson and Vuorela, 2002; Vlase, 2013).
After settlement, international migrants often try to keep family ties and regular contact across borders with those left behind thanks to a polymedia environment (Le Gal, 2005; Mazzucato and Schans, 2011; COFACE – Confederation of Family Organizations in the European Union, 2012; Madianou and Miller, 2012; Baldassar et al., 2016; Bryceson, 2019; Baldassar et al., 2016; Ducu et al., 2023). That of communication is a key issue for transnational families. The available means do not solve the separation problem but contribute to the transformation of relationships, mediating the interactions between family members. In the past, being able to communicate at a distance was expensive and asynchronous, which exacerbated the relationship. Today, people can be “virtually” and constantly be present in each other’s lives, having the opportunity to communicate daily, thanks to social media, video calls and so on. However, how the media act within the dynamics of transnational families depends on the quality of the pre-existing relationship, the age of the offspring and the range of available media that are affected by resources, financial and material capabilities, knowledge of use and time for their use (Madianou and Miller, 2012; Ducu et al., 2023). Mothers maintain the will to practice their role even from a distance, providing emotional support and guidance (Gheaus, 2013; Piperno, 2007). However, the results are not always successful. Several studies reported that children of migrant women often face stressful situations that affect their emotional development, social relations and school achievements (UNICEF, 2008; Castagnone et al., 2007; Sânduleasa and Matei, 2015; Yanovich, 2015; Botezat and Pfeiffer, 2020; Matei and Stroe, 2022). The effects of migration are thus extended to the well-being of members not participating in migration, which, according to Mazzucato and Schans (2011), should be understood as psychological, educational and health outcomes. Several studies reported relevant effects on family well-being, organisation and vulnerability (see, among others, Golinowska, 2008; Tolstokorova, 2009; Roman and Voicu, 2010; Boccagni, 2010; Bogdan, 2011; Alexe et al., 2012; Markova, 2015; Tosi and Impicciatore, 2022). Shipment of goods or sending money is not marginal as both allow a surrogacy mechanism that keeps active the affective bonds with the left behind (Vianello, 2009). Moreover, they improve the material welfare of migrants’ families as they act on poverty levels (Adams and Page, 2005). Remittances are primarily spent on food, cover living, housing expenses, education and savings (UNICEF, 2008; Mehedintu et al., 2020). Among workers in the care sector, their living-in conditions allow a high proportion of savings over their wages (Ambrosini, 2005). According to World Bank data (World Bank, 2018), remittances counted on average for 0.7% of GDP worldwide in 2017. Nevertheless, its share is estimated at around 2.1% in some areas like Central Europe.

Materials and methods

Sampling and characteristics of participants

The study analyses 12 biographical semi-structured held between November 2018 and December 2019 among Romanian women who worked as family caregivers in an Italian metropolitan city and the surrounding urban area. Respondents were firstly employed as living-in caregivers; currently, all still work as caregivers. However, some have chosen to transit to independent housing to facilitate cohabitation with their children.

Participants were recruited using a purposive chain-referral sampling whose initial group was identified among women orthodox churchgoers who worked as caregivers. The church is the primary meeting point in the city during Sunday liturgical service, a place of socialisation where they meet other Romanians, chat, establish contacts, gather information on job opportunities or practical issues, make friends and find help and support. The recruitment phase was the only critical moment of the survey because the women involved in care work generally have little free time and reduced participation in public and social life, making them difficult to reach. The study participants did not give written consent for their
data to be shared publicly, so supporting data is unavailable due to the research’s sensitive nature.

The average age of the interviewees is 44 years (min 34 years – max 57 years). They have been living in Italy on average for about 14 years and, for most of them, the migration project started before Romania entered European Union in 2007. Migratory projects were initially and forcibly undertaken as circular, with periods of irregular working conditions. Later, they moved towards stable projects, mainly thanks to the recognition of the right to mobility with the entry of Romania into Europe. They all left behind minor children at the time of their first migration, but few of them still had underage children at the time of the interview. Only two respondents were employed and had a diploma (or higher) at the time of first departure, while the others were low educated and used to occasionally or seasonally work in the countryside. The husband was the primary breadwinner, and his job loss or family’s low income pushed for migration. They come almost exclusively from the provinces of Iași and Botoșani, areas with a predominantly rural vocation on the northwest border with Moldavia.

Methods

The interview track was structured around the following key themes: migratory experience, family structure and stability, redefinition of roles within family members, family arrangement, management and care of children. Workers were asked to describe their migratory experience and discuss the key themes at different times (before leaving, first months of migration and current situation), trying to understand and identify the main changes and decisions taken. Interviews were conducted in Italian with the presence of a native-speaking Romanian and always took place in public places (i.e. café) or outdoors (i.e. parks and squares) to create a familiar atmosphere and free from constraints such as the presence of the employer or other compatriots. Interviews were audio recorded with respondents’ agreement, respecting GDPR rules and ensuring anonymity and confidentiality and later transcript.

We used the biographical method to reconstruct participants’ life and migration history to explore possible connections between the narration from their perspective and relevant changes in family dynamics and choices around the selected key themes (De Lillo, 2010). Using interviews allowed us to overcome possible linguistic barriers related to the respondents’ understanding of Italian, and it facilitated life course storytelling and the emergence of nuances and details related to the specificity of each participant. Participants felt free to report about the migration project, their experience and the emotional and psychological aspects that would not emerge in a structured questionnaire.

Results

In the narrative of the migration projects, there are some standard features. All women reported that it was not an individual decision, but the household members decided they should leave. The primary motivation was economic, and migration was considered the solution for precarious situations, unemployment and in many cases, extreme poverty. Industries collapse, financial hardship and political volatility have driven emigration mainly. As reported by S.S (36 years old), the will to improve family living conditions, and in general, its economic status, is reported as the first reason to migrate:

I don’t know, I didn’t even think about it. Probably at the time, probably, but I don’t remember well. I simply decided to leave, without thinking about anything. Of course, my son was always my first thought, but in my thinking there was also the fact that you have him but when you cannot offer him anything and then you don’t stay long to think […] and you leave […] [S.S., 36 years old].
Networks of family and friends encouraged the decision to migrate despite not having any experience and, in many cases, not even knowledge of the language; through migratory chains, they convinced them that they could easily find a job in Italy, often providing the first working contact and logistical support:

[... ] my mother was here in Italy, she had come one month before to replace a girl. I first time arrived in August and in this month, I did everything to get a job, no matter what [ ... ] I spoke little-little Spanish that I had learned by myself at home and at the beginning, I tried to use some Spanish words [ ... ] I came here and never went back [ ... ] [S.S., 36 years old].

Family structure and stability

Among the respondents, the transition following the migratory event from a traditional family model to a transnational was generally chaotic, especially because migration projects, mainly those that started before 2007, were initially conceived as circular, alternating periods of work in Italy with periods of return home. Women frequently enter the local labour market, pretending to be tourists and returning every three months. Some instead sometimes irregularly overstayed for more extended periods:

When I left Romania, the first time in my life, to come to work in 2005, it was September I remember. Thanks God my sister left first [... ] in Sicily I was. I started in Sicily to work. [...] Because I did not know that I could handle 3 days trip to get there in Sicily. It expected to catch the bus at night and the day after to arrive. But it was not so. It took 3 days journey. And the money I had because I needed to show them up at the border: 500 euros, to prove that I was entering in Italy as a tourist. I have to keep that money in cash because the money was from my sister who sent me and I had to give those 500 euro back to her [... ] I worked in Sicily for 4 years, doing these shifts with my sister every three months, because we were tourists, and then we have to go home [P.I., 43 years old].

I used to spend in Italy 6, 7 months and then I called a friend of mine to come over to replace me at work. Once, I did a year of work and then 2 months I stayed in Romania. The other year, I stayed 3 months in Romania. Initially I had planned to stay one month and then I end up staying 2-3 months. It has been 10 years [T.M., 41 years old].

However, as highlighted in previous studies, migrants often modify their initial short-term migration project and stay over, in a condition defined of “transition”, where – while maintaining the idea of returning home – they prolong their migration project. Conceiving your own migration plan as temporary or circular characterises those workers who undertake migration to maximise the economic return of their experience. There is no desire for integration in the destination country in their intentions, but women consider their migration a necessary interlude in their lives (Tognetti Bordogna, 2012; Vianello, 2014).

Consequently to the poor initial planning, the main challenge was to adapt and adjust the family structure to make it transnational. In the early stages, temporary family management solutions were adopted, and women tried to keep regular contact by making phone calls, which were expensive and difficult to access. Phone calls could only be made from a fixed device, at the employer’s home or from a phone booth. Digital communication presented many limitations, and the quality of relations parents–children was poor because, among the care workers, access to the internet and working duties did not allow regularity, synchronicity and reciprocity of contact:

It was very difficult because at the time there were not even all these phone offers. You could talk, you bought a card and I remember you had to do thousands of numbers, and you could talk for a certain number of minutes. I mean, a tragic thing. I used to do this refill and maybe, I don’t remember [... ] maybe we talked once a week [T.M., 41 years old].

The shift from old media to new media has transformed the experience of co-parenting (Madianou and Miller, 2012). The diffusion of mobile phones and the development of
applications to communicate through video have involved a significant change, accelerating and encouraging new forms of virtual co-presence and digital care (Ducu et al., 2023). Romania’s entry into the EU has reduced roaming costs, making daily communication accessible. People can even see each other through video. Despite, as pointed out by many respondents, such innovations have improved relationships, on the one hand, they fail to soothe the desire for physical contact; on the other hand, work tasks limit their actual use.

Remittances and home visits were crucial to maintaining ties with the left behind. Financial and material support by sending remittances and gifts has always been a contact thread. By contrast, returning to Romania for a holiday was difficult and expensive for many respondents. Even when – with the advent of low-cost companies – the return home could be seen as affordable, their employment contract did not always allow women to take breaks off. In several cases, workers reported being afraid of losing their jobs, as told by this interviewee who suddenly had to go back to Romania and, on her return, she had a bitter surprise:

And then afterwards, a tragedy happened to me. I called my older daughter. It was the year, I remember 2010, she was raped in Romania. It was the Christmas holidays; I took the ticket right away and I left and she still wasn’t okay. And when I got back, I got fired from my job. I was sad, because I’ve spent there all year, I was good and then when something happened that I couldn’t miss and I said it, one goes back […] I’ve tried to call her [she refers to the employer] because it was snowing […] I remember, the plane had not left in Romania, from Timisoara to Rome, after 2-3 hours we left. Unfortunately, I did not know how to call, how to say, because I had another number. I had an Italian number, but I could not use it in Romania. Before it was not like now, with roaming. And when I got there, I recharged and called […] “You come now? You’re fired, you can stay at home eating onion with bread”. You should have told me before that I should stay at home eating onion and bread. I’m in Rome, what do I do? Money, to tell you the truth, I didn’t have any money to go back. The plane ticket was a round trip. I had 80 euros [N.S., 48 years old].

At the time of the first emigration, a small group was divorced, but most of the respondents were married, and only some managed to keep their marital union. However, it is difficult to infer that migration was the cause of divorce because respondents reported that family stability was often compromised before their departure:

I mean, we were […] No, it was not a time of rupture, but a time of rapprochement because we were previously […] there had been a divorce. Then we got closer and after a little time he came. Few years later, there was the opportunity to leave and yes, I decided to come here, then the following year I called him with the child. […] They joined me here to spend summer holidays […], I told my husband “You go home” because we had some money already saved. “Go home and get your driving license”. He didn’t have it, because there was no chance, there was no money. But he had a bad habit. He wouldn’t have been stronger than he was, I mean, he was practically an alcoholic and all our plans failed. On his part, on my part. I had the will to achieve them. But since it was impossible, it was all over [A.N., 40 years old].

According to the respondents, being divorced per se is irrelevant as the choice to migrate placed them in a position of independence. Still, it becomes crucial in terms of the management of children left behind because, in the event of divorce, reunification becomes a priority.

Redefinition of roles

Migration has involved a process of adaptation to the family. This adjustment has concerned caregiving relationship, the role among its members and the financial responsibility. The migratory experience proves to be a moment of change and transformation. It promotes a process of negotiation in the hierarchical position in the family relations between the members of the family (Vlase, 2013). In the respondent group, the
mother became the primary breadwinner, responsible for the household’s sustenance and all the expenses. Except for one case, where the husband joined his wife after a year and moved permanently to live and work in Italy, the presence of children implied that the man stayed in the country of origin. He took care of children and, at the same time, of the family interests in Romania, like house management:

But I also thought that I go for a year so to make some money and then come back. I initially didn’t intend to stay, but unfortunately [...] so much money goes and once you get used to it, you have to come back [...] My husband didn’t work. He was dependent on my money. Because the region from where I come from does not offer many opportunities. And in fact we were living with my parents-in-law, they paid the electricity bills, water, gas. I felt guilty and sometimes I said “How do I do it? I have a family, I have a child. We have to work one of the two” so I had to go [A. C., 38 years old].

I had, and still have my house, the one I had before I met my husband. So, the house was there. I need just to cover the expenses of water, gas, no? the expenses of the house. And then, living there. Also my son […] he has made a nice big mortgage [...] well [...] it’s true that Mom helps pay the rent of my house. It is a help for the payment of instalment of the bank that is heavy [E.A., 57 years old].

Although we would expect to observe frequent cases in which grandparents and other relatives are supportive, this proved to be true in the early years of migration, as a temporary solution, when grandparents step into the family as surrogate parenting. However, when children exercise their agency on where and with whom they prefer to stay, or women do not want to burden the elderly parents, or the latter are unavailable, it is the father the primary caregiver, as M.I. reported (47 years old):

The father, yes, alone because my parents-in-law were dead. He alone cooked and accompanied her to school. She studied and raised slowly, slowly. I used to go home once a year for holidays, to say [...] the first years here [...] And then my daughter, I remember going to school; my daughter at that time was with my mother, but it was an environment that she didn’t like anyway. She was sick. She missed her parents, but not me; she was missing her father. As she grew up, he was her point of reference. She cares about me too, it’s not that, but he raised her.

**Children care management**

Children’s management during emigration and the mother’s absence unfolds according to two options: children are left behind or join the mother in Italy. The choice of reunification turns out to be complex. High costs of childbearing abroad, precarious living conditions or occupation, fear of adaptation capacity of children and educational prospects can discourage the decision of reunion (Pantea, 2012). However, it has never been excluded *a priori*, and the most consolidated is a process through stages. First comes the mother’s emigration, which often finds a living-in housing solution within the same dwelling of the family where she works. Later, after evaluating the availability of the employer to host the child or the opportunity to have independent housing, the mother tries to realise the reunion. The choice towards a solution of independent housing, on the one hand, meets the purpose of finding a housing solution more suited to the reunited family; on the other, it allows somehow the social mobility of the worker who, from a working condition of living-in, passes to a hourly paid work, contractually from home-based caregiver to domestic worker (Ambrosini, 2015):

After a year, in 2007, in the summer holidays, my son came, they allowed me to keep him with me, and since then, he has stayed with me. He studied here, had done first and second classes there in Romania, then attended the third primary school class and continued his studies here in Italy. Last year, he got the diploma. [...] When he first arrived, it was after a year that I was here. One year, I almost spent here alone, and after, when my son came. Anyway, I left everything. I
rented a house, and the hard part started. I left the living-in solution because it was unbearable, without sleep, day and night. An 8 year old child living in a family of 90 years old [A.D., 42 years old].

However, the path of reunion has not always been successful for the following two causes: providing appropriate housing and refusing children to live in Italy. Especially when migration projects are not well defined and definitive, reunion is complex, and the involved family members can have strong limits to adapt:

I came alone, the older child stayed at home a long time. My husband came, then after we decided to bring her because at the beginning we did not know if we were staying longer, or not […] but then my daughter stayed at home with grandparents with my mother-in-law and my father-in-law […] when she joined us here, she was in 5th class, 10 years old. But before that, we made a prior attempt: I brought her another time. She was attending kindergarten, the last year of kindergarten here and then […] she wanted to return to Romania. She was missing her grandparents, she was missing her country. She grew up there, so we decided in 1st year of school to take her back there. She stayed 2 years […] (laughs) […] I used to take her here, in summer to the sea and she stayed on holiday for 2-3 months, then she wanted to go back again […] yes, as school began. And then we decided she was already big. In the meantime, we had other children, I had these two daughters here (in Italy), and I always felt guilty that she was there (in Romania) and these two here. And then I finally decided to have all my children with us in Italy [R.S., 37 years old].

Conflict between parents and children is frequently stated, both in the presence of children or grown-up offspring, as reported by P.T. (54 years old). This aspect highlights that there may be a discrepancy between the will of the mother and that of the child, and children of different ages can manifest, albeit in various ways, their point of view on the migratory decisions of the family when they are directly involved (Botezat and Pfeiffer, 2020; Deng et al., 2022). It has been pointed out that there are significant differences according to the age of the children at the time of the mother’s migration. The younger they are, the more passive their role is within the decision-making process, but when they grow and the project changes, their decision-making power assumes more weight and becomes binding:

After he completed military service, my son came here to Sardinia, he lived with us […] He worked for a short time in the company and then he always found other jobs […] He tried to rent a house in the city, right? To be autonomous. He didn’t have his car, and we lived far from the city. But my son is much more […] He is very patriotic, very! At a certain point he used to say “I’ll never marry a Italian girl and never have a family here” […] He was 30 years old when he decided to leave, return to Romania and stay there. He met this girl, he worked, finished his studies, and they got married. In 2011 there was the official engagement [P.T. 54 years old].

The other side of the coin

Alongside success stories and projects, reunited families and grown-up children, several aspects related to children management emerged, highlighting migration’s most emotional and nostalgic side. Feelings like sadness, guilt, poverty, resignation and having nothing to lose at departure are recurring themes in all interviews. Migration was an opportunity to build a new life through economic improvement, but as time passed, the workers became aware of missing something. In the words of one of the respondents, “Unfortunately, we left behind many things, and we lost our children […]” (M.I. 47 years old). The experience reported by P.I (43 years old) stresses the possible effects of poor communication, secrecy, information selection, omissions and blurring, which amplify migrants’ malaise and impact on the familiar well-being, especially its psychological dimension (Ducu et al., 2023):

I used to go home once a year for holidays, but it wasn’t enough because the worst thing was that when you went home, you were so happy. You took the bus. Three days journey but I didn’t care as I could see my family, my mother, my daughter. But the worst thing was when I had to
leave because my daughter used to tell me when she was grown up: “Mom, take me to my grandmother because I want to cry, because I don’t want to see you when you leave.” And my heart would break, and I’d to leave. And I used to think, why did it come to this? Because there were no possibilities in Romania. I lived in the house of my parents-in-laws, it was ancient, but I wanted mine. […] My daughters didn’t understand. Mom is away. I didn’t have a phone at that time. I only could call on Sundays through another person who had a phone. I used to call on Sundays, and my daughter often asked me: “Mom, Mom, where are you?” I answered: “In Italy to work.” She cried and didn’t understand why I didn’t come back. “When are you coming back? When are you coming back? When are you coming back?” Difficult was the first years. Very difficult. Only suffering. Between them and me.

Some of the initial expectations have been disregarded. Almost all participants reported that in their first employment contract, as they had no experience, they accepted all the conditions requests from families because they prioritised having a job and a place to live. This attitude is widespread among migrants, especially in the early stages (Vianello, 2014). This submissiveness exposes them to situations of exploitation and physical and emotional stress, conditions that are tougher in case of irregular working contracts:

Having a contract is fine. There is but in practice, none sees it […] in practice the number of hours covered by insurance were not the same hours I worked, not at all, there was nothing. Caregivers now have Sundays and Thursdays off, although not, even so, all hours are covered by the contract. I instead had only Sundays, only 5 hours. Sometimes I preferred not to go out. I was so tired because I practically did not sleep at night; I had neither night nor morning. I was not quiet because I did not let her husband sleep and during the day I had to care for both of them. I wanted to stay home and rest. And even then, I couldn’t do it because they wouldn’t leave me alone [M.M., 34 years old].

However, longer migration projects involve more frequent changes of employers, with – in some cases – periods of unemployment. Workers acquired with time the consciousness of their rights, the hours worked and their awareness of defending their time and its value:

It depends on the person, whether you accept them or not. If you are forced, you accept them. If you have your line, well […] these days, I had a job interview where I was asked to work full-time. This meant 54 hours per week. Why do you only have to hire me for 30? Legally. I don’t care about accepting these conditions anymore [E.A., 57 years old].

In the complexity of migratory experience, the economic aspect and the role of remittances represent the rouge file in the migration life course. At the initial stage, they are the motivation to leave; during the experience, they are the counterweight for unsatisfactory working situations and the emotional impact of being away from the family. Remittances also play a relevant role for future as when the migration experience ends, and there will be the long-awaited return to the home country, the accumulated remittances will represent the guarantee for the family welfare.

Discussion

The analysis of the biographies of the participants in this study shows that migration is a stressful event in care workers’ life and their families. It implies a continuous negotiation between “here” and “there” in a constantly changing context. In the group of respondents, migration projects are far from rational, where the shift from a traditional family to a transnational one has often been chaotic due to the exploratory and circular strategies adopted by workers, especially in the initial phase of migration. To decide to “leave not to leave” allowed them to face migration with a precise, lucrative goal and to have the approval of family members and social acceptance (Tognetti Bordogna, 2012). With time, the workers do not abandon the idea of returning home, but continue to postpone it, becoming “transition” migrant (Vianello, 2014).
Regarding the family union’s stability, the interviews show a break where the relations between the spouses were already compromised before. The distance and separation following migration initially freeze the decision, to make it later inevitable and reunion with children becomes a priority. This outcome might also result from renegotiating power structures in the family and rebalancing financial and caregiving responsibilities (Vlase, 2013; Pries, 2022). In this negotiation process, the weight of the family’s economic maintenance and its members’ welfare passes to the migrant woman, who feels the duty to maximise the savings to cover current expenses and future projects, underlying the primary role of financial and material dimensions.

Managing children in a transnational family implies the involvement of substitute carers, like partners and grandparents, allowing proxy co-presence (Baldassar et al., 2016). According to Romanian culture, it is socially acceptable to leave children in the care of others due to a traditional “diffuse” family that shows that it has adapted its structure to the new practice of transnationalism (Hossu, 2019). Although it has been highlighted that while long-distance grandparenting was known, long-term grandparenting has to be considered a new practice (Pantea, 2012).

Following Ambrosini (2005) classification, we observe that the respondents’ families are initially circular due to the rules to enter in Italy. Women commuted between Italy and Romania, leaving young children at home and adopting temporary solutions. However, as the project continues, children grow and families become intergenerational, with less frequent visits despite the recognised freedom of movement with the entry into the EU of Romania. This last aspect seems somewhat paradoxical, also considering the minor traveling costs. Women use the advantages acquired in terms of freedom to extend the work project and in practice, even if they are willing to, being a care worker limits their travel choices. In fact, some employers are reluctant to allow periods of interruption from work, as migrant workers often deal with people who need continuous assistance. It is usually up to workers to find a replacement during holidays, which must be trusted to guarantee that it does not replace them.

Trace of the limitations that stem from being a care worker are also found in the dynamics of reunification and communication. Interviewed women reported numerous attempts to join up with their children. The care dilemma – workers had already faced when they decided to leave – comes back as they have the chance to change their initial decision and get closer to their children. Reunion is initially discouraged by childbearing abroad costs, inadequate housing solutions and educational projects (Pantea, 2012). Usually, living-in housing is not ideal for the children and requires employers’ consent. The alternative is to opt for independent housing, which is an expensive solution that not all workers are ready to afford because, on the one hand, it reduces savings and, on the other, it precludes those job opportunities that require the permanent presence of the woman in the family where they work. Moreover, despite the worker’s desire to bring the children to Italy, it can happen that the latter might not agree. This aspect emphasises the decision-making capacity of the children, who are actively involved in renegotiating the balances within the family (Glick, 2010; Deng et al., 2022). Accordingly, studies on transnational families need a multiagency approach to the decision process, and it is encouraging that more and more studies are adopting this perspective, which would also need to find feedback on policies and actions in support of transnational families.

Today, the polymedia environment makes virtual care accessible (Baldassar et al., 2016). Today, phone calls are low-priced; shipment of goods and video communication are popular and accessible. All these factors ensure frequent contacts with those who remain in the country of origin, so one should expect to observe improved digital practices and quality of communication in more recent years. Time availability becomes a crucial element in the parent–child relationship quality (Ducu et al., 2023). Indeed,
despite the agreed hourly commitment, care workers often do not have enough time to devote to themselves and distant family members, especially in case of irregular work.

In Italy, there persists a high proportion of irregular workers or workers with a contract covering fewer hours per week than those worked, eroding the free time to allocate to caregiving of their own family (Ambrosini, 2013, Reyneri, 2005). Many of the resources identified by Merla and Baldassar (2011) such as mobility, time allocation and paid work are not guaranteed for workers in the care sector, particularly those dedicated to caring for elderly and sick people, who are severely penalised. Working and contractual conditions thus become part of the structural factors – together with migration policies, laws and so on – that affect the opportunities and capability of workers to provide and receive care. In this context, investigating the point of view of employers could make a relevant contribution to improving working conditions and a review of national collective agreements. They, in fact – as we have found from the testimonies – indirectly participate in the decision-making process of transnational families, for example, in some cases of reunification, but even more they determine the rules of work, the management of time and in addition to what is established by a formal contract.

Emotional elements constantly permeate the respondents’ stories in different phases of their migratory experience. Over the past decade, there has been increasing attention on the psychological effects on children left behind. Still, it becomes necessary to improve knowledge of the emotional and psychological consequences on the workers themselves (Tosi and Impicciatore, 2022; Tosi, 2020). Recent studies in this field have shown that those employed in the care sector present the so-called “Italia Syndrome” on their return home, which refers to psychiatric disorders. Forms of depression primarily affect a growing share of care workers that have assisted older people and, more severely, those without medical training who provided long-term care for the severely ill (Vaccaro and Ministrello, 2021; Costanzo and Gravina, 2022; Battistini, 2019). Including this aspect allows a deeper interpretation of the migratory experience as it allows us to consider the existence of two worlds that coexist simultaneously in the lives of those who migrate. Women reported they feel like they are in a middle land, where they are not entirely integrated and accepted in the destination country, but at the same time, uprooted from their origins where they no longer feel comfortable. To not burden their families emotionally at home, the workers often give outside a winning image of their migratory experience, omitting their hardships and problems and emphasising the advantages of staying away, especially economically. However, this lack of transparency in communication further underscores the quality of relationships and the well-being of all family members (Ducu et al., 2023).

The picture here outlines several valuable indications for possible actions that can improve well-being in transnational families. Firstly, it emerges that in the care sector in Italy, despite the progress made at the contractual level, it is still necessary to implement more binding rules to protect workers and measures from eradicating irregular work. Findings show that, especially for workers living within the families they work, the overlap between the working and personal spheres penalises them strongly. Living-in condition reduces the level of freedom in the management of family ties, especially with respect to the “true” personal time of the worker. In addition, contractual terms (if informal) do not allow access to several key resources for care circulation, such as mobility, time allocation, appropriate housing, paid work.

Secondly, the findings emphasise that transnational families may be particularly vulnerable in the presence of fragile individuals, such as very old parents and minors. However, it should be pointed out that this analysis shows that children are not merely passive subjects but have an awareness of their situation and increasingly participate in family choices, also deciding where to live. Policies aimed at supporting children should take this into account...
and no longer consider them as exclusively disadvantaged people but rather as proactive individuals in family dynamics.

And lastly, it is evident that given the nature of care work, women constantly face a *care dilemma* that impacts their well-being. This dimension begins to have increasing attention, although corrective actions to ensure the protection of workers, and social and psychological support, cannot be limited to the destination countries, but women workers should also be the recipients of support and reintegration actions to their homecoming.

References


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