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Romanian transnational families: Insights from a qualitative study on care workers.

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Romanian transnational families:

Insights from a qualitative study on care workers.

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 contribution 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.

Study design and methodology: 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: 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

Introduction

In recent decades, international migration flows have experienced a significant increase and catalyzed scholars' attention not only to the economic consequences and their impact on the labor 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 feminization 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 2012; Pries 2022; Matei and Bobârnat 2021). Following migration, frequently family becomes transnational where geographical distance implies reorganization, 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; Bêlorgey 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

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2
3 others, Sandu 2010; Baldwin-Edwards 2005; Horvarth 2008; Alexe et al. 2012; Anghel et al. 2016).

4
5 The emigration of ethnic groups characterized the first wave, and Germany was one of the leading
6 destination (but also transit) countries, along with Hungary. Later, Romanians moved to France,
7
8 Belgium, Italy, Spain, and the UK (Bleahu 2004; Anghel 2008; Cingolani and Piperno 2006). Italy
9
10 has always been a privileged destination for several reasons: the historical presence of Italians in
11
12 Romania and the growing number of Italian investors since the first years of post-regime economic
13
14 transition; the role of the Catholic Church, which supported the first flows of emigration (Ban 2009;
15
16 Jacob 2014; Alexe et al. 2012; Anghel et al. 2016); and its informal economy that has often allowed
17
18 the irregular entry into the labour market (Reyneri and Fullin 2010; Mara 2012; Ambrosini 2015).
19
20
21 Moreover, the Italian care sector - characterised by a family welfare system - has greatly demanded
22
23 female workers (Vianello 2014). With the abolition of controls in the Schengen area in 2002 and the
24
25 subsequent accession of Romania to the European Union in 2007, the mobility of Romanian citizens
26
27 has exponentially increased, and it has become less selective, with a growing share of mature women
28
29 (AIIR-CR 2020). In Romania at least one third of the country's population has been abroad for at
30
31 least six months in the last 30 years (Anghel et al. 2016). Data on temporary migration count that
32
33 2,577,656 people have experienced in 2008-2018 a migratory experience abroad not exceeding 12
34
35 months (INS 2019).
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42 The study is based on the analysis of 12 biographical interviews conducted using semi-structured
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44 interviews between November 2018 and December 2019 among Romanian women who worked as
45
46 caregivers in families in an Italian metropolitan city and the surrounding urban area. The collected
47
48 information allowed us to describe the experience of this group of women and their families during
49
50 the different phases of their migratory project. The choices of women workers imply changes over
51
52 time in the structure and management of the family of origin in a context of interdependence between
53
54 the individual and familial dimensions.
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58 The article first discusses the main theoretical frameworks that deal with migration and
59
60 transnationalism, then presents an empirical review. The latter allows us to highlight the key factors

1
2
3 and significant implications for transnational households related to their structure, stability, and
4
5 general well-being. Secondly, the article presents the most important findings of the biographical
6
7 analysis to discuss the possible consequences at the individual, family, and social levels on
8
9 transnational families of migrant workers in the care sector.
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16 **Care workers: between migration and transnationalism**

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19 New economic theories of migration have been among the first to drive the attention of researchers
20
21 on the role of the family (Massey et al. 1993). As Glick (2010) highlights, there is migration
22
23 selectivity within the household, a process through which it is decided who migrates and who stays.
24
25 Networks act on the self-propulsive nature of migration (Massey et al. 1993) and provide migrants
26
27 with access to information, material, and social support (see for a review Chi 2020). Migration can
28
29 also undermine the stability of the family. However, the timing of family events is often unknown,
30
31 and it makes difficult to establish the direction of the cause-and-effect relationship between migration
32
33 and union dissolution (see for a review Glick 2010; Flowerder and Al-Amad 2004; Muszynska and
34
35 Kulu 2006; Boyle et al. 2008; Caarls and Mazzucato 2015).
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39
40 Theoretical developments often adopt a multilevel approach to include several levels of analysis, and
41
42 a life course perspective to account for changes that migrants face across their migrational experience
43
44 (Castels and Miller 1993; Kulu and Milewski 2007; Glick 2010; Kley 2011; Wingens et al. 2011;
45
46 Edmonston 2013). With the intensification of labour international migration flows and the
47
48 increasingly frequent adoption by workers of temporary and circular migration projects, some
49
50 researchers introduced the concept of 'liquid migration' to describe this phenomenon (Engbersen et
51
52 al. 2010). In this context of high mobility, workers are constantly moving, and they adapt their
53
54 projects to the demand and needs of the labour market. These dynamics, together with the limitations
55
56 imposed by the mobility rules for certain groups of migrants, often lead to transnationalism, which
57
58 considers migration a bi-multidirectional phenomenon, where individual trajectories develop within
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3 family dynamics connected to supranational networks (Glick Schiller et al. 1992; Portes et al. 1999;
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5 Parreñas 2001; 2005; Baldassar et al. 2016; Pries 2022).

7 According to the definition given by Bryceson and Vuorela (2002:18), transnational families are
8
9 *“families that live some or most of the time separated from each other, yet hold together and create*
10
11 *something that can be seen as a feeling of collective welfare and unity, namely familyhood, even*
12
13 *across national borders”*. Transnational families are therefore characterized by the continuity of
14
15 relations and the status of dependency between the different members, where the circulation of care
16
17 is central, but it also involves social practices that are exercised at a distance (Boccagni 2009;
18
19 Baldassar et al. 2016). Field research has identified three main types of transnational families:
20
21 circular, intergenerational, and puerocentric (Ambrosini 2005). According to this classification,
22
23 transnational circular families involve adult and mature mothers with children of different ages who
24
25 frequently return home. Conversely, the presence of grown-up children characterizes
26
27 intergenerational families, and visits are rare since the migration project is oriented to return home.
28
29 While, in puericentric families, despite having minor children, migrants rarely visit them but instead
30
31 aim at a reunion in preparation for a stabilization in the destination country.

32
33 Transnational families are fluid and complex to analyse, and not all migrants have the same degree
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35 of freedom and opportunities, which are influenced by laws, political rules, labour market structure,
36
37 access to digital media, and cultural and social customs (Glick 2010, Skrbiš 2008). Moreover, not all
38
39 migrants can optimize the available resources to support caregiving, which, according to Merla and
40
41 Baldassar (2011), include: mobility, communication, social relations, time-allocation, education and
42
43 knowledge, paid work, and appropriate housing. The type of migration project and care practices are
44
45 highly heterogeneous among migrants according to their origin and the type of caregiving relationship
46
47 (Ambrosini 2005; Baldassar et al. 2016; Mazzucato and Dito 2018).

48
49 In parallel with the growing feminization of migration flows, there is an increasing interest in the
50
51 issue of gender in migration studies, and this variable also becomes part of the theoretical framework
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53 for transnational families (Christou and Kofman 2022). In these cases, researchers deal with
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3 transnational motherhood, which focuses on possible changes and adjustments in the economic
4 sphere, the responsibilities of circular care and solidarity, and family welfare (Matei and Bobârnat
5 2022). When women migrate and they are culturally and socially the only ones considered as able to
6 provide adequate care to other family members, their absence affects family relations, the power
7 gender structure, leading to rewriting the parental role, identities, emotional ties, and relationship
8 (Boccagni 2010; Bryceson and Vourela 2002; Vlase 2013).

9
10 After settlement, international migrants often try to keep family ties and regular contact across borders
11 with those left behind thanks to a polymedia environment (Le Gal 2005; Mazzucato and Schans 2011;
12 COFACE 2012; Madianou and Miller 2012; Baldassar et al. 2016; Bryceson 2019; Baldassar et al.
13 2016; Ducu et al. 2023). That of communication is a key issue for transnational families. The available
14 means do not solve the separation problem but contribute to the transformation of relationships,
15 mediating the interactions between family members. In the past, being able to communicate at a
16 distance was expensive and asynchronous, which exacerbated the relationship. Today, people can be
17 'virtually' and constantly be present in each other's lives, having the opportunity to communicate
18 daily, thanks to social media, video calls, and so on. However, how the media act within the dynamics
19 of transnational families depends on the quality of the pre-existing relationship, the age of the
20 offspring, and the range of available media that are affected by resources, financial and material
21 capabilities, knowledge of use and time for their use (Madianou and Miller 2012, Ducu et al 2023).
22 Mothers maintain the will to practice their role even from a distance, providing emotional support
23 and guidance (Gheaus 2003; Piperno 2007). However, the results are not always successful. Several
24 studies reported that children of migrant women often face stressful situations that affect their
25 emotional development, social relations, and school achievements (UNICEF 2008; Castagnone et al.
26 2007; Sănduleasa and Matei 2015; Yanovich 2015; Botezat and Pfeiffer 2020; Matei and Stroe 2022).
27 The effects of migration are thus extended to the well-being of members not participating in
28 migration, which, according to Mazzucato and Schans (2011), should be understood as psychological,
29 educational, and health outcomes. Several studies reported relevant effects on family well-being,
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3 organization, and vulnerability (see, among others, Golinowska 2008; Tolstokorova 2009; Roman
4 and Voicu 2010; Boccagni 2010; Bogdan 2011; Alexe et al. 2012; Markova 2015; Tosi and
5 Impicciatore 2022). Shipment of goods or sending money is not marginal since both allow a surrogacy
6 mechanism that keeps active the affective bonds with the left-behind (Vianello 2009). Moreover, they
7 improve the material welfare of migrants' families as they act on poverty levels (Adams and Page
8 2005). Remittances are primarily spent on food, cover living, housing expenses, education, and
9 savings (UNICEF 2008; Mehedintu et al. 2020). Among workers in the care sector, their living-in
10 conditions allow a high proportion of savings over their wages (Ambrosini 2005). According to World
11 Bank data (2018), remittances counted on average for 0.7 % of GDP worldwide in 2017.
12 Nevertheless, its share is estimated at around 2.1% in some areas like Central Europe.
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30 **Materials and Methods**

31 *Sampling and characteristics of participants*

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33 The study analyses 12 biographical semi-structured held between November 2018 and December
34 2019 among Romanian women who worked as family caregivers in an Italian metropolitan city and
35 the surrounding urban area. Respondents were firstly employed as living-in caregivers; currently, all
36 still work as caregivers. However, some have chosen to transit to independent housing to facilitate
37 cohabitation with their children.
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40 Participants were recruited using a purposive chain-referral sampling whose initial group was
41 identified among women Orthodox churchgoers who worked as caregivers. The church is the primary
42 meeting point in the city during Sunday liturgical service, a place of socialization where they meet
43 other Romanians, chat, establish contacts, gather information on job opportunities or practical issues,
44 make friends, and find help and support. The recruitment phase was the only critical moment of the
45 survey because the women involved in care work generally have little free time and reduced
46 participation in public and social life, making them difficult to reach. The study participants did not
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3 give written consent for their data to be shared publicly, so supporting data is unavailable due to the
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5 research's sensitive nature.
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8 The average age of the interviewees is 44 years (min. 34 years - max 57 years). They have been living
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10 in Italy on average for about 14 years and, for most of them, the migration project started before
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12 Romania entered European Union in 2007. Migratory projects were initially and forcibly undertaken
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14 as circular, with periods of irregular working conditions. Later, they moved towards stable projects,
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16 mainly thanks to the recognition of the right to mobility with the entry of Romania into Europe. They
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18 all left behind minor children at the time of their first migration, but few of them still had underage
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20 children at the time of the interview. Only two respondents were employed and had a diploma (or
21
22 higher) at the time of first departure, while the others were low educated and used to occasionally or
23
24 seasonally work in the countryside. The husband was the primary breadwinner, and his job loss or
25
26 family's low income pushed for migration. They come almost exclusively from the provinces of Iași
27
28 and Botoșani, areas with a predominantly rural vocation on the northwest border with Moldavia.
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35 *Methods*

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38 The interview track was structured around the following key themes: migratory experience, family
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40 structure and stability, redefinition of roles within family members, family arrangement, management
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42 and care of children. Workers were asked to describe their migratory experience and discuss the key
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44 themes at different times (before leaving, first months of migration, and current situation), trying to
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46 understand and identify the main changes and decisions taken. Interviews were conducted in Italian
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48 with the presence of a native-speaking Romanian and always took place in public places (i.e., café)
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50 or outdoors (i.e., parks and squares) to create a familiar atmosphere and free from constraints such as
51
52 the presence of the employer or other compatriots. Interviews were audio recorded with respondents'
53
54 agreement, respecting GDPR rules and ensuring anonymity and confidentiality, and later transcript.
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57 We used the biographical method to reconstruct participants' life and migration history to explore
58
59 possible connections between the narration from their perspective and relevant changes in family
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3 dynamics and choices around the selected key themes (De Lillo 2010). Using interviews allowed us
4
5 to overcome possible linguistic barriers related to the respondents' understanding of Italian, and it
6
7 facilitated life course storytelling and the emergence of nuances and details related to the specificity
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9 of each participant. Participants felt free to report about the migration project, their experience, and
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11 the emotional and psychological aspects that would not emerge in a structured questionnaire.
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17 **Results**

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20 In the narrative of the migration projects, there are some standard features. All women reported that
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22 it was not an individual decision, but the household members decided they should leave. The primary
23
24 motivation was economic, and migration was considered the solution for precarious situations,
25
26 unemployment, and in many cases, extreme poverty. Industries collapse, financial hardship, and
27
28 political volatility have driven emigration mainly. As reported by S.S (36 years old), the will to
29
30 improve family living conditions, and in general its economic status, is reported as the first reason to
31
32 migrate:
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36 *"I don't know, I didn't even think about it. Probably at the time, probably, but I don't remember well. I*
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38 *simply decided to leave, without thinking about anything. Of course, my son was always my first thought,*
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40 *but in my thinking there was also the fact that you have him but when you cannot offer him anything and*
41
42 *then you don't stay long to think... and you leave..." [S.S., 36 years old].*

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44 Networks of family and friends encouraged the decision to migrate despite not having any experience
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46 and, in many cases, not even knowledge of the language; through migratory chains, they convinced
47
48 them that they could easily find a job in Italy, often providing the first working contact and logistical
49
50 support.

51
52 *"...my mother was here in Italy, she had come one month before to replace a girl. I first time arrived in*
53
54 *August and in this month, I did everything to get a job, no matter what ... I spoke little-little Spanish that I*
55
56 *had learned by myself at home and at the beginning, I tried to use some Spanish words... I came here and*
57
58 *never went back..." [S.S., 36 years old]*
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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 characterizes those workers who undertake migration to maximize 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).

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3 Consequently to the poor initial planning, the main challenge was to adapt and adjust the family
4 structure to make it transnational. In the early stages, temporary family management solutions were
5 adopted, and women tried to keep regular contact by making phone calls, which were expensive and
6 difficult to access. Phone calls could only be made from a fixed device, at the employer's home, or
7 from a phone booth. Digital communication presented many limitations, and the quality of relations
8 parents-children was poor because, among the care workers, access to the internet and working duties
9 did not allow regularity, synchronicity, and reciprocity of contact.
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20 *“It was very difficult because at the time there were not even all these phone offers. You could talk, you*
21 *bought a card and I remember you had to do thousands of numbers, and you could talk for a certain number*
22 *of minutes. I mean, a tragic thing. I used to do this refill and maybe, I don't remember... maybe we talked*
23 *once a week.” [T.M., 41 years old].*
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28 The shift from old media to new media has transformed the experience of co-parenting (Madianou
29 and Miller 2012). The diffusion of mobile phones and the development of applications to
30 communicate through video have involved a significant change, accelerating and encouraging new
31 forms of virtual co-presence and digital care (Ducu et al. 2023). Romania's entry into the EU has
32 reduced roaming costs, making daily communication accessible. People can even see each other
33 through video. Despite, as pointed out by many respondents, such innovations have improved
34 relationships, on the one hand, they fail to soothe the desire for physical contact; on the other hand,
35 work tasks limit their actual use.
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46 Remittances and home visits were crucial to maintaining ties with the left behind. Financial and
47 material support by sending remittances and gifts has always been a contact thread. In contrast,
48 returning to Romania for a holiday was difficult and expensive for many respondents. Even when -
49 with the advent of low-cost companies - the return home could be seen as affordable, their
50 employment contract didn't always allow women to take breaks off. In several cases, workers
51 reported being afraid of losing their jobs, as told by this interviewee who suddenly had to go back to
52 Romania and, on her return, she had a bitter surprise:
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3 “And then afterwards, a tragedy happened to me. I called my older daughter. It was the year, I remember
4 2010, she was raped in Romania. It was the Christmas holidays; I took the ticket right away and I left and
5 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
6 year, I was good and then when something happened that I couldn't miss and I said it, one goes back...
7 I've tried to call her [she refers to the employer] because it was snowing... I remember, the plane had not
8 left in Romania, from Timisuara to Rome, after 2-3 hours we left. Unfortunately, I did not know how to call,
9 how to say, because I had another number. I had an Italian number, but I could not use it in Romania.
10 Before it was not like now, with roaming. And when I got there, I recharged and called... “You come now?
11 You're fired, you can stay at home eating onion with bread”. You should have told me before that I should
12 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
13 any money to go back. The plane ticket was a round trip. I had 80 euros.” [N.S., 48 years old].
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22 At the time of the first emigration, a small group was divorced, but most of the respondents were
23 married, and only some managed to keep their marital union. However, it is difficult to infer that
24 migration was the cause of divorce because respondents reported that family stability was often
25 compromised before their departure.
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32 “I mean, we were... No, it was not a time of rupture, but a time of rapprochement because we were
33 previously... there had been a divorce. Then we got closer and after a little time he came. Few years later,
34 there was the opportunity to leave and yes, I decided to come here, then the following year I called him
35 with the child. (...) They joined me here to spend summer holidays (...), I told my husband “You go home”
36 because we had some money already saved. “Go home and get your driving license”. He didn't have it,
37 because there was no chance, there was no money. But he had a bad habit. He wouldn't have been stronger
38 than he was, I mean, he was practically an alcoholic and all our plans failed. On his part, on my part. I
39 had the will to achieve them. But since it was impossible, it was all over” [A.N., 40 years old].
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45 According to the respondents, being divorced *per se* is irrelevant since the choice to migrate placed
46 them in a position of independence. Still, it becomes crucial in terms of the management of children
47 left-behind because, in the event of divorce, reunification becomes a priority.
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53 54 55 *Redefinition of roles*

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57 Migration has involved a process of adaptation to the family. This adjustment has concerned
58 caregiving relationship, the role among its members, and the financial responsibility. The migratory
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3 experience proves to be a moment of change and transformation. It promotes a process of negotiation
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5 in the hierarchical position in the family relations between the members of the family (Vlase 2013).
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7 In the respondent group, the mother became the primary breadwinner, responsible for the household's
8
9 sustenance and all the expenses. Except for one case, where the husband joined his wife after a year
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11 and moved permanently to live and work in Italy, the presence of children implied that the man stayed
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13 in the country of origin. He took care of children and, at the same time, of the family interests in
14
15 Romania, like house management.
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20 *“But I also thought that I go for a year so to make some money and then come back. I initially didn't intend*
21 *to stay, but unfortunately... so much money goes and once you get used to it, you have to come back (...)*
22 *My husband didn't work. He was dependent on my money. Because the region from where I come from*
23 *does not offer many opportunities. And in fact we were living with my parents in-law, they paid the*
24 *electricity bills, water, gas. I felt guilty and sometimes I said "How do I do it? I have a family, I have a*
25 *child. We have to work one of the two" so I had to go” [A.C., 38 years old].*
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31 *“I had, and still have my house, the one I had before I met my husband. So, the house was there. I need just*
32 *to cover the expenses of water, gas, no? the expenses of the house. And then, living there. Also my son (...)*
33 *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*
34 *the payment of instalment of the bank that is heavy” [E.A., 57 years old].*
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39 Although we would expect to observe frequent cases in which grandparents and other relatives are
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41 supportive, this proved to be true in the early years of migration, as a temporary solution, when
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43 grandparents step into the family as surrogate-parenting. However, when children exercise their
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45 agency on where and with whom they prefer to stay, or women do not want to burden the elderly
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47 parents, or the latter are unavailable, it is the father the primary caregiver, as M.I. reported (47 years
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49 old):
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53 *“The father, yes, alone because my parents-in-law were dead. He alone cooked and accompanied her to*
54 *school. She studied and raised slowly, slowly. I used to go home once a year for holidays, to say... the first*
55 *years here (...)* And then my daughter, I remember going to school; my daughter at that time was with my
56
57 *mother, but it was an environment that she didn't like anyway. She was sick. She missed her parents, but*
58 *not me; she was missing her father. As she grew up, he was her point of reference. She cares about me too,*
59 *it's not that, but he raised her”.*
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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 realize 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

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3 *here, she was in 5th class, 10 years old. But before that, we made a prior attempt: I brought her another*
4 *time. She was attending kindergarten, the last year of kindergarten here and then... she wanted to return to*
5 *Romania. She was missing her grandparents, she was missing her country. She grew up there, so we*
6 *decided in 1st year of school to take her back there. She stayed 2 years... (laughs)... I used to take her here,*
7 *in summer to the sea and she stayed on holiday for 2-3 months, then she wanted to go back again... yes, as*
8 *school began. And then we decided she was already big. In the meantime, we had other children, I had*
9 *these two daughters here (in Italy), and I always felt guilty that she was there (in Romania) and these two*
10 *here. And then I finally decided to have all my children with us in Italy" [R.S., 37 years old].*

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17 Conflict between parents and children is frequently stated, both in the presence of children or grown-
18
19 up offspring, as reported by P.T. (54 years old). This aspect highlights that there may be a discrepancy
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21 between the will of the mother and that of the child, and children of different ages can manifest, albeit
22
23 in various ways, their point of view on the migratory decisions of the family when they are directly
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25 involved (Botezat and Pfeiffer 2020; Deng et al. 2022). It has been pointed out that there are
26
27 significant differences according to the age of the children at the time of the mother's migration. The
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29 younger they are, the more passive their role is within the decision-making process, but when they
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31 grow and the project changes, their decision-making power assumes more weight and becomes
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33 binding.
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39 *"After he completed military service, my son came here to Sardinia, he lived with us (...) He worked for a*
40 *short time in the company and then he always found other jobs (...) He tried to rent a house in the city,*
41 *right? To be autonomous. He didn't have his car, and we lived far from the city. But my son is much more...*
42 *He is very patriotic, very! At a certain point he used to say "I'll never marry a Italian girl and never have*
43 *a family here" (...) He was 30 years old when he decided to leave, return to Romania and stay there. He*
44 *met this girl, he worked, finished his studies, and they got married. In 2011 there was the official*
45 *engagement"* [P.T. 54 years old].
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50 51 *The other side of the coin*

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53 Alongside success stories and projects, reunited families and grown-up children, several aspects
54
55 related to children management emerged, highlighting migration's most emotional and nostalgic side.
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57 Feelings like sadness, guilt, poverty, resignation, and having nothing to lose at departure are recurring
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59 themes in all interviews. Migration was an opportunity to build a new life through economic
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3 improvement, but as time passed, the workers became aware of missing something. In the words of
4 one of the respondents, “Unfortunately, we left behind many things, and we lost our children...” (M.I.
5 47 years old). The experience reported by P.I (43 years old) stresses the possible effects of poor
6 communication, secrecy, information selection, omissions, and blurring, which amplify migrants’
7 malaise and impact on the familiar wellbeing, especially its psychological dimension (Ducu et al.
8 2023).

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

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

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52 *“Having a contract is fine. There is but in practice, none sees it... in practice the number of hours covered*
53 *by insurance were not the same hours I worked, not at all, there was nothing. Caregivers now have Sundays*
54 *and Thursdays off, although not, even so, all hours are covered by the contract. I instead had only Sundays,*
55 *only 5 hours. Sometimes I preferred not to go out, I was so tired because I practically did not sleep at night;*
56 *I had neither night nor morning. I was not quiet because I did not let her husband sleep and during the day*

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3 *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*
4 *wouldn't leave me alone" [M.M., 34 years old].*
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8 However, longer migration projects involve more frequent changes of employers, with - in some
9 cases - periods of unemployment. Workers acquired with time the consciousness of their rights, the
10 hours worked, and their awareness of defending their time and its value.
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14 *"It depends on the person, whether you accept them or not. If you are forced, you accept them. If you have*
15 *your line, well... these days, I had a job interview where I was asked to work full-time. This meant 54 hours*
16 *per week. Why do you only have to hire me for 30? Legally. I don't care about accepting these conditions*
17 *anymore" [E.A., 57 years old].*
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22 In the complexity of migratory experience, the economic aspect and the role of remittances represent
23 the rouge file in the migration life course. At the initial stage, they are the motivation to leave; during
24 the experience, they are the counterweight for unsatisfactory working situations and the emotional
25 impact of being away from the family. Remittances also play a relevant role for future as when the
26 migration experience ends, and there will be the long-awaited return to the home country, the
27 accumulated remittances will represent the guarantee for the family welfare.
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39 **DISCUSSION**

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42 The analysis of the biographies of the participants in this study shows that migration is a stressful
43 event in care workers' life and their families. It implies a continuous negotiation between "here" and
44 "there" in a constantly changing context. In the group of respondents, migration projects are far from
45 rational, where the shift from a traditional family to a transnational one has often been chaotic due to
46 the exploratory and circular strategies adopted by workers, especially in the initial phase of migration.
47
48 To decide to "leave not to leave" allowed them to face migration with a precise, lucrative goal and to
49 have the approval of family members and social acceptance (Tognetti Bordogna 2012). With time,
50 the workers do not abandon the idea of returning home, but continue to postpone it, becoming
51 "transition" migrant (Vianello 2014).
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3 Regarding the family union's stability, the interviews show a break where the relations between the
4 spouses were already compromised before. The distance and separation following migration initially
5 freeze the decision, to make it later inevitable, and reunion with children becomes a priority. This
6
7 outcome might also result from renegotiating power structures in the family and rebalancing financial
8 and caregiving responsibilities (Vlase 2013; Pries 2022). In this negotiation process, the weight of
9
10 the family's economic maintenance and its members' welfare passes to the migrant woman, who feels
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12 the duty to maximize the savings to cover current expenses and future projects, underlying the
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14 primary role of financial and material dimensions.
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21 Managing children in a transnational family implies the involvement of substitute carers, like partners
22 and grandparents, allowing proxy co-presence (Baldassar et al 2016). According to Romanian culture,
23
24 it is socially acceptable to leave children in the care of others due to a traditional “diffuse” family that
25
26 shows that it has adapted its structure to the new practice of transnationalism (Hossu 2019). Although
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28 it has been highlighted that while long-distance grandparenting was known, long-term grandparenting
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30 has to be considered a new practice (Pantea 2012).
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35 Following Ambrosini (2005) classification, we observe that the respondents' families are initially
36 circular due to the rules to enter in Italy. Women commuted between Italy and Romania, leaving
37
38 young children at home and adopting temporary solutions. However, as the project continues,
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40 children grow and families become intergenerational, with less frequent visits despite the recognized
41
42 freedom of movement with the entry into the EU of Romania. This last aspect seems somewhat
43
44 paradoxical, also considering the minor traveling costs. Women use the advantages acquired in terms
45
46 of freedom to extend the work project and in practice, even if they are willing to, being a care worker
47
48 limits their travel choices. In fact, some employers are reluctant to allow periods of interruption from
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50 work, as migrant workers often deal with people who need continuous assistance. It is usually up to
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52 workers to find a replacement during holidays, which must be trusted to guarantee that it does not
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60 replace them.

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

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

25 In Italy, there persists a high proportion of irregular workers or workers with a contract covering
26 fewer hours per week than those worked, eroding the free time to allocate to caregiving of their own
27 family (Ambrosini 2013, Reineri 2005). Many of the resources identified by Merla and Baldassar
28 (2011) such as mobility, time-allocation, and paid work, are not guaranteed for workers in the care

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3 sector, particularly those dedicated to caring for elderly and sick people, who are severely penalized.
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5 Working and contractual conditions thus become part of the structural factors - together with
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7 migration policies, laws, and so on - that affect the opportunities and capability of workers to provide
8
9 and receive care. In this context, investigating the point of view of employers could make a relevant
10
11 contribution to improving working conditions and a review of national collective agreements. They,
12
13 in fact - as we have found from the testimonies - indirectly participate in the decision-making process
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15 of transnational families, for example in some cases of reunification, but even more they determine
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17 the rules of work, the management of time and in addition to what is established by a formal contract.
18
19 Emotional elements constantly permeate the respondents' stories in different phases of their migratory
20
21 experience. Over the last decade, there has been increasing attention on the psychological effects on
22
23 children left behind. Still, it becomes necessary to improve knowledge of the emotional and
24
25 psychological consequences on the workers themselves (Tosi and Impicciatore 2022; Tosi 2020).
26
27 Recent studies in this field have shown that were employed in the care sector present the so-called
28
29 "Italia Syndrome" on their return home, which refers to psychiatric disorders. Forms of depression
30
31 primarily affect a growing share of care workers that have assisted older people and, more severely,
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33 those without medical training who provided long-term care for the severely ill (Vaccaro and
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35 Minestrello 2021; Costanzo and Gravina 2022; Battistini 2019). Including this aspect allows a deeper
36
37 interpretation of the migratory experience since it allows us to consider the existence of two worlds
38
39 that coexist simultaneously in the lives of those who migrate. Women reported they feel like they are
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41 in a middle land, where they are not entirely integrated and accepted in the destination country but at
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43 the same time, uprooted from their origins where they no longer feel comfortable. To not burden their
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45 families emotionally at home, the workers often give outside a winning image of their migratory
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47 experience, omitting their hardships and problems and emphasizing the advantages of staying away,
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49 especially economically. However, this lack of transparency in communication further underscores
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51 the quality of relationships and the well-being of all family members (Ducu et al. 2023).
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3 The picture here outlines several valuable indications for possible actions that can improve well-being
4 in transnational families. Firstly, it emerges that in the care sector in Italy, despite the progress made
5 at the contractual level, it is still necessary to implement more binding rules to protect workers and
6 measures from eradicating irregular work. Findings show that, especially for workers living within
7 the families they work, the overlap between the working and personal spheres penalizes them
8 strongly. Living-in condition reduces the level of freedom in the management of family ties especially
9 with respect to the "true" personal time of the worker. In addition, contractual terms (if informal) do
10 not allow access to several key resources for care circulation, such as mobility, time-allocation,
11 appropriate housing, paid work.
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14 Secondly, findings emphasise that transnational families may be particularly vulnerable in the
15 presence of fragile individuals, such as very old parents and minors. However, it should be pointed
16 out that this analysis shows that children are not merely passive subjects but have an awareness of
17 their situation and increasingly participate in family choices, also deciding where to live. Policies
18 aimed at supporting children should take this into account and no longer consider them as exclusively
19 disadvantaged people but rather as proactive individuals in family dynamics.
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21
22 And finally, it is evident that given the nature of care work, women constantly face a *care dilemma*
23 that impacts their well-being. This dimension begins to have increasing attention, although corrective
24 actions to ensure the protection of workers, and social and psychological support cannot be limited
25 to the destination countries, but women workers should also be the recipients of support and
26 reintegration actions to their homecoming.
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53 **Authors' declarations**

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