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ABSTRACT

Only recently has attention in gender studies on migration been paid to family/work reconciliation strategies. Currently, there are few studies that focus not only on the point of view of mothers, but also on broader intra-family gender dynamics, especially in countries of more recent immigration. This paper examines the work/family reconciliation ideals, plans and practices of immigrant couples from Morocco, Peru and Romania living in Italy during their transition to parenthood. We analyzed in-depth interviews with migrant mothers and fathers with children under the age of 6, at different stages of the transition to parenthood. Contradictions between ideals of "the good father provider" and "intensive motherhood" and actual practices emerged, and gendered care narratives may be used to bridge the gap between ideals and practices. Although immigration fosters innovations and gender negotiations, the receiving context tends to hinder the emergence of less asymmetrical divisions of responsibilities for child care and paid work.

KEYWORDS: Migrant families, Gender, Balancing Paid Work and Child Care, Italy

Word count: 7994

Introduction

The role of migrants as caregivers in their destination areas was initially conceptualized as a form of support for native middle-class parents (mothers) outsourcing paid care through global circuits (Ehrenreich & Hochschild, 2002; Campani & Chiappelli 2014). Scholars have explored the issue of transnational caregiving by focusing on female immigrants and reframing migration through a gender lens (Kofman *et al.*, 2000; Kraler *et al.*, 2011). This literature provides valuable empirical insights into care arrangements for the children left behind (i.e. Parreñas, 2005) by concentrating on mobility and 'absence' in family life (Baldassar & Merla, 2014).

By contrast, analysis of how migrant parents reconcile child care and paid work in receiving countries remains limited, particularly when it comes to EU countries of more recent immigration (Bonizzoni, 2014; Wall & São, 2004 are exceptions). Even in traditional immigration countries, there are few longitudinal studies on the ideals and plans which underpin practices deployed during the early stages of the transition to parenthood. There has

been little research on fathers, intra-family gender dynamics (Pribilsky, 2004) and the influence of the receiving context on migrant parenting (Perreira, Chapman & Stein, 2006).
In this article, we consider the intersection of family, employment and migration regimes (Williams, 2012) by focusing on ideals, practices and narratives regarding parenthood and work/family reconciliation during the early years of children's lives. By illustrating the ways in which immigrants define their care arrangements during the early stages of parenthood in the destination country, this article intends to contribute to the debates on "gendered migration and global social reproduction" (Kilkey & Palenga-Möllenbeck, 2016; Kofman & Raghuram, 2015) and work/family balance during the transition to parenthood (Fox, 2009; Grunow & Everson, 2016).

1. Research on (Migrants') Reconciliation Strategies

In order to consider migrants' agency, as well as the multilayered processes that influence the gendered reconciliation practices of immigrant parents in specific receiving contexts, we adopted Risman's theoretical framework of "*gender as a social structure*" (Risman, 2004). According to this approach, gender is embedded in the individual, interactional and institutional dimensions of society. Moving beyond new structuralist and constructivist approaches of gender, Risman's framework pays attention "both to how structure shapes individual choice and social interaction and how human agency creates, sustains, and modifies current structure. Action itself may change the immediate or future context" (Risman & Davis, 2013, p. 12). In this article we view reconciliation strategies as dynamic, temporary ways of coping with gaps between (individual and family) ideals and practices (Hochschild, 1989). These gendered strategies are negotiated and realized by means of interaction within the couple in specific cultural and institutional contexts, and they change across the different stages of the life course. We thus analysed narratives on negotiations within the couple as 1) a crucial aspect of the reconciliation strategies themselves; 2) tools used to "justify" both the gaps between ideals and practices (González, Domínguez & Luppi, 2013; Miller, 2011), and the gaps between mothers' and fathers' preferences and resources; 3) part of the wider "adaptive culture" developed by migrant parents "to manage diversity and the differential access to resources that accompanies their social positions" (Perreira, Chapman & Stain, 2006, p. 1385).
To this end, the second approach that we adopted conceptualizes the (*transnational) caregiving "capacity"* of a family. Socio-economic resources, "willingness", and perceptions

of needs, influenced by cultural norms, contribute to shaping immigrants' caregiving capacity (Baldassar, Baldock & Wilding, 2007). The negotiation of family commitments at specific stages of the individual life course is influenced by family and migration history (Ibid.). Migrants' resources for caring can indeed be enhanced or hampered by structural factors, such as migration policies, employment situation, eligibility for and access to public support for parents: the policy and legal contexts shape the "multi-local" reproductive practices of migrants (Kilkey & Palenga-Möllenbeck, 2016).

Previous studies have identified factors that can encourage migrant couples to perform gendered work/care arrangements during the transition to parenthood (Menjívar, Abrego & Schmalzbauer, 2016). Immigration laws may force migrant families into nuclear family forms (Kofman, 1999) by cutting off the support which would otherwise be provided by the parents' kinship network. Thus the ideal of sharing childcare responsibilities with kin/community/neighbourhood, cannot put into practice (Chinosi, 2002). Moreover, lack of a regular contract, long or atypical working hours, and low pay may discourage migrant mothers from returning to work after childbirth, make it more difficult to access maternity and parental leave, and lead to mothers being laid off (Bonizzoni, 2014).

Conversely, migration may sometimes lead to an increase in the number of working mothers, due to the fact that families need to maintain two incomes. In Italy, as in other receiving countries, migrants tend to work in the lower-paid segments of the labour market more often than natives (Reyneri & Fullin, 2011; Saraceno, Sartor & Sciortino, 2013). Moreover, after emigration, the gendered division of family work may change due to men participating more in household tasks (Menjivar, 1999; Cucurachi, Guazzetti & Tognetti Bordogna, 2004 cited in Santero, 2008) and being more involved in prenatal health services (Chinosi, 2002). Indeed, "men's involvement in migration goes well beyond their role as economic provider, and generates dilemmas, suffering, and emotional contradictions" (Gallo & Scrinzi, 2016, p. 6). Contextual factors and different family models (Foner, 1997) may also foster the empowerment of women through paid work and access to more social resources than in their country of origin (Morokvasic, 2007).

Research, however, shows the need for a contextualized picture of changing gender practices after migration (Menjívar, Abrego & Schmalzbauer, 2016). Women coming from "traditional" societies by means of family reunion can find their segregation exacerbated, without the compensatory autonomy that comes from having a community of women to lean on (Decimo, 2005). The consequences of migration can be influenced by gendered migration circuits (Kofman, 2012). In this regard, Italy is an interesting case because of the presence of

highly gendered inflows – some male-dominated, others female-dominated (Zontini, 2010). Female migrant networks, within male-dominated circuits, may reinforce gendered obligations at the expense of paid work and training (Santero, 2008).

The idea that female immigration to developed economies must necessarily lead to itineraries of gender emancipation has therefore been criticized. Findings in Spain, the Netherlands, Greece, France, Germany and Turkey have shown that female migration instead contributes to persistent "traditional" gender divisions of work and family responsibilities (León, 2010; Morokvasic, 2007; Kirk & Suvarierol, 2014). Symmetrically, the employment of migrant men in the domestic sector does not necessarily imply changes in ideals and practices concerning masculinity – as fieldwork on handymen in the USA and in the UK has revealed (Kilkey *et al.*, 2013). These results suggest that the specific effects of the institutional, economic, and cultural context in receiving countries need to be investigated in order to understand how migrant families try to reconcile work and family life, as well as their agency and the innovations they introduce to address the gaps between their ideals and the resources at their disposal.

This paper focuses on how immigrant families from Romania, Morocco and Peru combine paid work and family commitments around parenthood in Italy. These three groups represent three of the main ethnicities in Italy. Romanians were the main immigrant group in 2016 according to the Italian Institute of Statistics. Female Romanian migrants represented 57% of the Romanian citizens living in Italy. In 2014 46% of the Moroccan residents in Italy were women, in the context of a migration flow that was initially male-dominated, while the Peruvian group was an example of a traditionally female-dominated circuit, with female migrants amounting to 58% (Caritas, 2016).

2. The Italian context

Italy has its own specific characteristics in terms of employment, migration, and care regimes (Bonizzoni, 2014; Van Hooren, 2012), and also in terms of the intersection of these three regimes (Williams, 2012). Immigrants, are typically employed in highly segregated and low-paid jobs: typically manual work for men (Istat, 2015) and care work for women (Da Roit, González Ferrer & Moreno-Fuentes, 2013). In Italy, elder care is indeed witnessing a shift from a "family" model to a (female) "migrant in the family" model (Bettio, Simonazzi & Villa, 2006; Naldini & Saraceno, 2008).

The Italian care regime has long been marked by the cultural dominance of the male breadwinner model, and persistence of the traditional gender division of work (Eurostat, 2008; Naldini & Jurado, 2013). In terms of state welfare support, "unsupported familialism" (Saraceno & Keck, 2010) results in a lack of measures designed to help reconcile labour-market participation and parenthood. Important changes in legislation have recently been introduced, but they are nonetheless of limited scope.

Firstly, despite an important paradigm shift in reconciliation policies (Law 53/2000), which now define childcare as a parental, rather than purely maternal, responsibility, the Italian parental leave law has several shortcomings. Maternity pay is only 30% of pay for a maximum of six months. Non-standard work contracts, which mainly apply to men and women in the reproductive age group, are excluded from some measures that protect motherhood or support reconciliation, and where entitlement does exist, implementation is difficult. Moreover, although the new law introduces a "use or lose" quota of leave for the father, the take-up rate remains limited (Istat, 2011; Koslowski, Blum & Moss, 2016).

Secondly, there are relatively few childcare services for children under three years of age in Italy: in 2012, the rate of children under three using a public childcare service was 13.5 per cent on a national level (Istat, 2014), and this figure varied geographically. In the area in which this study took place it was 14.9 per cent, covering only 50 per cent of the demand. Pre-primary school services for three to six year olds are well-developed, but school hours tend to be shorter than a normal working day, so that parents with full-time jobs are unable to combine family and work without some additional help, provided mainly by grandparents.

Finally, company reconciliation policies in Italy are inadequate: flexible work schedules and "family-friendly" measures are not widespread and many employees are unable to take advantage of them (Fine-Davis *et al*, 2004, Naldini, 2015).

These unfavourable conditions in terms of work/family reconciliation makes it particularly difficult to combine family life and work for families: 1) which lack informal (family) social support; 2) whose members have non-standard work contracts; 3) whose members work in sectors which have atypical and often 'asocial' working hours; 4) whose members have lower negotiating power with their employers. Migrant families everywhere are more likely to experience these four constraints. But more so than in other EU countries, in Italy migrants do not benefit from public resources devoted to supporting working parents.

3. The qualitative study

This article draws on a qualitative study involving heterosexual migrant parents living in Piedmont.[1] It involved both mothers and fathers in couples, either employed or looking for paid work. This empirical material makes it possible to analyze the negotiation of gendered conciliation strategies at three different stages of the family life cycle: before the first child's birth; during the first two years after the child's birth, and when the children are aged three to six. The research was based on semi-structured interviews conducted with 33 migrant parents in couples: a first group of 18 first-time parents in transition to parenthood, and a second group of 15 parents with at least one children under six. The longitudinal interviews with the 18 first-time parents (nine couples) took place at least four months before the birth of the first child (first wave), and around one year and half after it (four couples) (second wave). The partners were interviewed separately.[2]

The interviewees were contacted through associations, NGOs, cultural mediators, and random sampling in places such as markets and underground stations.

All the interviews were conducted between February 2012 and July 2015. All the interviewees except one were born abroad, in Peru (two mothers, one father), Romania (twelve mothers, nine fathers), Morocco (five mothers, three fathers). Only one Moroccan woman had left her home country when she was a child, in 1985. The other respondents had arrived in Italy between 1997 and 2012. Most of the parents lived in co-ethnic couples, with the exception of four mixed immigrant couples.

Nineteen respondents out of 33 had an upper-secondary school diploma or a university degree; five had a vocational qualification, and the others had lower educational qualifications.

The professional position of the fathers did not change significantly after the child's birth. Almost all of them were manual workers, with long working hours, except for a union official and an orthodox priest, who was the only male participant working part-time. Two were unemployed; four had an open-ended contract; five were temporary workers; two were self-employed; and one had no formal contract. Their incomes varied between 1,100 and 2,000 Euros per month, with the average being 1,300 Euros.

Conversely, the careers of the women were more complex and diversified. Before childbirth 12 out of 19 had been in the paid labour market, while the other seven interviewees were

[1] Interviews conducted within the Research Project *Practices and Policies around Parenthood. Work-family balance and childcare in multicultural contexts*, P.I. Manuela Naldini, based on the comparative Transparent Project.

[2] Since 8 respondents were interviewed twice, we collected 41 interviews in total. We use invented surnames, referring to the wave of interview, for couples involved in the longitudinal interviews and invented first names for the individual interviewees.

unemployed. The majority of the women in employment (ten out of twelve) worked as housemaids, child-minders or care-workers, with atypical schedules, paid by the hour. Four women in this group worked in the informal sector, three had open-ended contracts and three were temporary employees. The other two women, a secretary and an employee in an orthodontic laboratory, had permanent contracts. Furthermore, only two women out of twelve worked full-time; all the others had reduced working hours that varied between two to six hours per day. Unlike the fathers, after the child's birth their professional situation changed: there was an increase in part-time work, and the number of unemployed mothers rose from six to twelve (two of them were employed full-time on open-ended contracts). The average gender pay gap was about 1,000 Euros.

This article sets out to answer three main questions: 1) What are the main work/family ideals, plans, and practices of migrant families with young children in regard to parenthood? 2) Are there any gaps between ideals and practices and between migrant mothers and fathers? 3) What type of narratives do migrants perform to address the gaps in work/family reconciliation in the context of the receiving country?

4. Results

4.1. Ideals and Plans: "Good Mothers" and "Good Fathers"

The immigrants interviewed considered the mother's presence to be essential for the child's well-being especially during the first year of the child's life. The father was viewed as an economic provider and a support for the mother in emergencies or for particular events. Narratives on what was "best for the child" revealed gendered models of division of family responsibilities in all the nationalities involved.

(The principal caregiver) has to be the mum. Because she is closer to the children, she's the one who looks after them. The dad brings in the money, it's the mum who stays with the children. Much much more, you look after them, breastfeed them, feed them, you know what the baby wants, and the dad is out all day working ... A mum is everything: all your feelings, your life. Everything. If the dad's not there it's not the same as when the mum's not there (Lamya, Moroccan)

The general expectation was that the mother would reduce her working hours, or if this was not possible, that she would resign, even if she was the female breadwinner. It is important to note that such gendered expectations have also been found among native Italian families

(Musumeci, Naldini & Santero, 2015), but Italian citizens can access work-related measures, such as leave or holidays more easily, or reduce their working hours without losing their jobs.

Interestingly, whilst highly-educated Italian couples (Naldini, 2015) were in favour of the "new" model of involved, intimate fathers (Dermott & Miller, 2015), even when in practice the mother was still the primary care-giver, immigrant couples tended to use gendered arguments, even though these sometimes contradicted their innovative practices.

For example, interviewees reported that immigrant fathers-to-be's experiences of living alone after immigration (see also Pribilsky, 2004) or with partners who were live-in care workers with long or "atypical" working hours, tended to foster male involvement in domestic work, more than in the family of origin. Moreover, the participants described the importance of the father/child relationship, the fathers' role in establishing rules, and in some cases also in other tasks such as dressing the children and cooking for them. However, only a minority of parents, mostly Romanian, expressed egalitarian gender ideals:

The father can do everything too, because if the mum isn't there, he HAS TO, and even if he has never done it before, he can always learn (Mirela, Romanian)

The role of economic provider remained a crucial dimension of masculinity, in the accounts of both migrant mothers and fathers. This was particularly clear in narratives about male unemployment or fathers' parental leave. Most of the fathers were unaware of it, and the others were not entitled to it. Even those entitled to it did not intend to make use of it, preferring to opt for paid work (see also Santero, 2016).

Moreover, respondents' expectations of "intensive motherhood" (Faircloth, Hoffman & Layne, 2013) appear to be reinforced because their care ideals involving the family network, especially in the case of Moroccans, clashed with achievable plans. This seems to be due to the age and socio-economic composition of the migrants' network. Despite the fact that the majority of participants reside close to relatives and/or have re-established a "fictive" kinship after migration, most of the migrant parents' relatives and friends, given their own paid work and caring responsibilities, were not able to offer support:

I have my brother, but he's not around much, he's got his own life... his Romanian wife has her sisters, one or two of them in Turin, but they've got it worse than me… You can't ask them to give you a hand because they all have their own families, they all have children. Everyone has to do their own things, it's difficult (Mr Burat, Moroccan, first wave).

Participants also expect grandmothers not in full-time paid work to be embedded in tight transnational care bonds, thus they can rarely devote themselves to a single family with small children.

Going beyond cultural understandings of migrants' experiences (Erel, 2009), we argue that plans and practices of "intensive mothering/parenting" (Faircloth *et al.*, 2013) can be interpreted by considering the migrants' resources, their lack of information and entitlements to existing public support for the families with children.

4.2 Migrants' Work-Care Arrangements Over Time

The work-family arrangements vary greatly according to the parents' occupational status and working conditions, the availability of informal resources, and lastly the accessibility of formal childcare services. But overall, work-care strategies vary according to the specific stage in the life course, overtime, since they are strongly correlated to the child(ren)'s age and needs.

When the child is very young (0-3), it is difficult for migrant families to maintain the *dual participation model* (both working full time). In our sample the male breadwinner model was the most widespread family model among the couples interviewed in the second wave, when the child was 18 months old, or of parents interviewed when at least one child was under 3. In general, it is more difficult for migrant families to remain dual earners steadily over the transition to parenthood than it is for native families.

Firstly, this is because they are very often not entitled to maternity or parental leave, and have quite limited network resources. Secondly, it is because of the very unfavourable nature of their jobs. Care-work – the main sector of employment for the mothers – and blue-collar work – the main occupation of the fathers in our sample – both generally involve long and/or "asocial" hours not easy to reconcile with intensive baby care needs and with the cost of childcare services.

As a consequence of these constraints, for many migrant couples, the transition to parenthood and the months soon after a new baby's arrival are characterized by the mother (temporarily) leaving the labour market, moving toward a male breadwinner model.

This pattern cross-cuts all the ethnicities surveyed, regardless of whether it was the result of a "choice" or a "lack of alternatives". During this first phase of the child's life most of the families relied on a child-care strategy that was very much *mother-centred*: the mother being the main care-giver together with sporadic help from the social network and the father when

not at work. Those families in which the women migrated for family reunification purposes, even with high expectations of the woman's participation in the labour market, were more likely to have mother-centred reconciliation strategies.

Because the transition to parenthood is a crucial phase in the biographies of individuals and families, it clearly highlights potential and actual gender gaps between ideals and practices.

Mr and Mrs Burat are a mixed-ethnicity couple, with fewer gender asymmetries than other Moroccan couples. She is a Romanian child-minder and domestic worker. He is a Moroccan labourer. Before giving birth Mrs Burat was the higher earner, and she did not plan to stay at home after the baby's arrival. Conversely, after the child's birth, they became (almost) a male breadwinner family. She felt that she had to give up her job because she alone had to care for the baby. However, both felt it was necessary for her to return to work for financial reasons, and she also wanted to work "to have a bit of time off, since I'm there all day, morning and evening, all day always the same… routine" (Mrs Burat, Romanian, second wave).

Unlike the Burats, there were mothers who adopted a *work-centred reconciliation strategy* and decided to keep their jobs, even soon after the baby's arrival. Sometimes, especially when the child was still a baby, this decision clashed with the ideals of "intensive motherhood" and might lead to the mother being perceived as not having other options – as in the following story.

Clarissa emigrated alone from Peru in 1999 because her family needed her to provide financial support. She had a baby of four months. She worked part-time in the morning, although she would have liked to work full time as a domestic worker. Her partner was Brazilian and had arrived in Italy in 2006. After the baby's arrival, he was unemployed, and in an effort to increase his skills he was attending a training course. Since Clarissa's was a female breadwinner family, she and her partner had decided that she would return to work soon after childbirth. She worked in the morning from 9 a.m. to 1 p.m., and before going to work she left the baby with a friend who looked after him for free. In Clarissa's words, this was the "only solution" they had.

A work-centred reconciliation strategy is the most common way to deal with the tension between income and care needs when the child is growing up. Especially when work was part of the migration project, as soon as the baby could be cared for by an external service, the mother re-entered the labour market.

The gap between ideals and practices regarding the intensive maternal care model during the baby's first 2-3 years is exemplified by Adela, who migrated from Romania for work reasons in 2008. She was the mother of a 3-year-old child. She had two part-time jobs as a domestic

worker and carer. Adela and her husband, also Romanian were a dual-earner family which reconciled work and childcare by using public crèches and the support of their cohabiting paternal grandmother. She had a very pragmatic and gender-flexible approach to childcare arrangements: "If I'm working, it's my husband who picks the kid up from the crèche, and if he's working, it's me who goes to pick her up". This gender flexible work-care arrangement clashed with Adela's ideals. She would have liked to stay at home longer to look after her daughter. As she declared: "If I were in Romania, I would have the option of staying at home for two years".

The care arrangements of our interviewees tended to increase in complexity and diversity as the child grows up, and *multiple childcare arrangements emerge.* This is a combination of formal services (childcare or preschool services) and informal support (parents and social network). The use of formal childcare services is quite intensive for those mothers who want to remain in or re-enter the paid labour market. But combining work and care in a dual earner couple quite often requires extending childcare strategies to include a mix of formal and informal resources. As the cases of Clarissa and Adela show, informal resources make the difference in supporting the mother's employment. Informal resources may be internal, resulting from household strategies of living together with relatives, or they may be based more on friendships in the community: this was particularly evident in our sample of Peruvian parents. Overall, what distinguishes informal resources utilised to manage childcare and work is their gendered nature (Decimo, 2005; Santero, 2008). In the case of social support provided by relatives, the latter are primarily mothers and mothers-in-law, sisters, or sisters-in-law often living in the extended household. In the case of social support provided by neighbours and peers, the help is given mainly by female friends of the mother or female neighbours.

As shown by several studies (Attias-Donfut, Ogg & Wolff, 2005; Le Bihan *et. al.*, 2013), the extended family network, grandparents in particular, is a crucial resource when it comes to combining childcare and work (especially in the case of very young children) in Italy. Transnational resources – in particular, commuting grandmothers – provide emotional and practical support to mothers after childbirth who have no local support. This resource was rare among our interviewees, in accordance with their expectations, because of legal, practical or financial obstacles to family reunification with the elderly, and because most of the grandparents living in Italy were in the paid labour market.

The "lack of grandmothers", and the parents' employment position in the receiving country push migrant families towards strategies which include a more varied care mix and extensive

care delegation, but also the father's involvement. The following paragraph therefore examines the narratives around gendered reconciliation strategies.

4.3 Couples' Gender Narratives

Conceptualizing reconciliation strategies as narratives (Miller, 2011) provisional mediations between ideals and practices (Hochschild, 1989) in interactional and institutional contexts (Risman, 2004), we identified three types of gender narratives concerning mothers' and fathers' care roles and the allocation of paid and unpaid work.

We called the first type *ongoing negotiation*: this was when the mother wanted the father to be more involved in childcare and tried to achieve this by means of requests, discussions and fights. Alexandru and his wife, nurses and psychotherapists from Romania, constantly argued about their work and care responsibilities. "Because there are indirect and direct consequences for the family" affirmed Alexandru, highly aware of the couple's agency: "The situation will certainly change, we are those who act to change things". In this case, negotiation almost always leads towards egalitarian practices, but asymmetries persist, for example with regard to parental leave, which Alexandru has not taken due to pressure from colleagues, but also because "culturally I had to bring home the money", "to be the dad."

This type of bargaining occurred when the mother had a better paid job or higher qualifications, but the father did not intend to decrease his commitment to paid work. This was the case of Mrs Oradea, Romanian, with a degree in social sciences in Italy, secretary and aspiring teacher. Although her husband would have preferred a mother or family-centred care strategy involving the grandparents, she tried to negotiate to obtain greater involvement from the father. The solution for reducing these conflicts, as explained by Mr Oradea, a Peruvian self-employed worker, was the crèche. Public care services – also appreciated by immigrant parents for socialization purposes, fostering the children's integration in Italy – helped to mitigate couples' quarrels about care responsibilities by allowing mothers to return to work (even if only part-time). This was especially true when fathers were strongly opposed to being involved in childcare and the mothers' negotiation failed. Mohamed was another father who negotiated his responsibilities. He had a degree in economics from Morocco, and in Italy he was a forklift truck driver with three shifts: morning, afternoon, night. His wife, also Moroccan, had a degree in urban planning from Venice University, and was a part-time care worker and civil servant for the municipality of Turin. She had a long-term EU permanent residence permit which granted a family residence permit to her husband. Before the marriage, the couple's agreement regarding childcare, approved by Mohamed's mother, had

been entirely based on the wife. Two years after the child's birth, however, in order to increase the household income and for self-fulfilment, in Mohamed's words: "she decided to work. She told me: 'Look, if I return to work, you must do this, that and the other…' At the beginning I didn't know how to do anything". For Mohamed, however, it was a temporary solution. He remarked that "males are born to work outside the home", and that "so many times I think I can't cope with it and ask my wife to stay at home".

Whilst some Romanian interviewees reported having egalitarian ideals, despite asymmetrical practices, and in Peruvian networks single and female breadwinners appear to have more legitimacy, Moroccan participants reported a prevalence of gender asymmetries in both ideals and practices in their network, though the influence of the family was lower after emigration. This context appears to be the one which most discourages gender negotiating narratives.

Another obstacle to female bargaining power lay in the mother's job situation, usually weaker than the husband's. For example Florina, a Romanian part-time informal domestic worker with three children, wanted her husband, who worked for a company building luxury boats, to spend more time with their children, but his employer did not allow him to take leave. In the following extract she defines her asymmetric financial position:

> I work more than my husband ... but he's got more money, he brings more money home... But I'd also like to make more money (laughs), no no, I would like it to be half and half in that sense ... today you with children, tomorrow me... I'd like that. (Florina, Romanian)

The second group of migrants enacted *narratives of separated spheres* based on the distinct roles of *male breadwinner and female caregiver*. Here we found two different repertoires. The first expressed a gap between gender equal ideals and practices, according to which female unemployment 'has not been chosen'.

> Now I don't really think about what I want ... It's not up to me, it's just what I have to do... (Claudia, Romanian)

The second legitimized the gender asymmetries in resources and structural constraints to "natural differences" or "the culture of origin". Romanian fathers appeared more likely to rationalize the gap between egalitarian ideals and asymmetrical practices in terms of different (biological) predispositions between men and women.

References to the indispensable role of the mother emerged when the mother had lost her job during the transition to parenthood and the couple, especially if from Morocco, began to refer to their "culture of origin", as if it were something static, while in the first wave, or before emigration and the arrival of the first child, they had in part moved away from that model.

After the child's birth, men with employment positions previously subordinate to those of their partners could contribute to maintaining this new-found gender power asymmetry by putting their work first, for example by choosing a new home close to their workplace and away from their partner's relatives and professional contacts. This was the case of the Alouis, a dual-earner couple before the birth of their child. Mrs Aloui had arrived in Italy before her husband and had a more stable job. A year and a half later, at the time of the second interview, they had become a male breadwinner family, but they did not agree on the narrative of separate spheres.

If you were staying at home for example at the weekend would you be willing to take care of the baby and housework if your wife was at work?

Yes, sure.

After the first year do you think your wife will go back to work, or continue to look after your son full time?

She could go back to work if she finds something that fits in with the new situation (Mr. Aloui, first wave)

Talking about going back to work or not, have you talked to your husband?

He too thinks that that job (live-in carer) is not suitable for a woman with a baby. But we did talk about me going back to work, we sorted it out a couple of days ago. I told him "Look, I'm going to look for a job ... because I'm not used to staying at home", and he didn't say anything. That means it's okay. (Mrs. Aloui, first wave)

What does being a good mother in Morocco mean?

/ That you stay at home / (laughing).

And what about being a good mother here, then?

I reckon it's the same here (Mr. Aloui, second wave)

In Morocco it's the mother's job to look after everyone. The father goes to work and then comes home, but that's not what I want (laughing)! It should be a bit fairer. (Before his son was born) he used to wash the windows, the floor… Now he does one shift... and I have to do everything. Because I'm always at home (...) / Men.. / (laughing) (Mrs. Aloui, second wave)

Fathers could also subtly discourage mothers from seeking work by being unwilling to take on some of the (increased) responsibilities related to childcare. These narratives were particularly persistent when the mother had emigrated through family reunification with the husband and had no female kin in Italy.

The counter-normative female breadwinner was the third type of narrative that we identified. It occurred in female breadwinner families, where fathers were involved in care duties due to their precarious employment and the "lack of grandmothers". Our study shows that these patterns are more common when the migrant mother arrives in the destination country before

her partner, or independently from him, and, in case of extra-EU migrants, has a proper residence permit, work-related and independent from the husband. This was the case of Clarissa, illustrated above. Interestingly, even in these cases, migrants, especially from Morocco, tended to describe “European parents” as more gender-equality oriented, despite the changes taking place in their own families.

Moroccans don’t like doing these things. You ask them, and they say "Ah, I’m a man. I can’t do this”. But Europeans do everything. They don’t think that they can’t and they're not ashamed of doing these things, but ours don’t ... I tell you that thirty percent of them help their women and seventy percent are / HARD-HEADED! / (Lamya, Moroccan)

Indeed, these narratives justify the shift in mothers’ responsibilities as providers in the labour market but not those of fathers towards being the main care-giver. Especially when mothers were unemployed or worked part-time, fathers tended to do little childcare and housework. Despite the fact that in some of these narratives fathers (from Romania or South America) said that they were willing to be the main care giver, they would prefer the one-and-a-half worker model:

I also told her "If I can't get much work and you find something better, you go out to work and I'll stay at home with the kids." The important thing is for one of us to be working (...) I would prefer part-time work for my wife because as a woman and a mother she spends more time with them (the children) (Eric, Romanian)

The involvement of fathers in childcare was partly rejected by respondents, with a view to protecting a masculinity already compromised by losing their breadwinner status (Menjivar, Abrego & Schmalzbauer, 2016). However, the ideals of all participants remained anchored to the notion of “good father provider”, both when fathers were described by their partners as “willing” and “able” to look after the very young children, and when they were deemed “unwilling” and “unable” to do so.

Peruvian accounts contained more fluid ideas about couples’ relationships and female breadwinning. Conversely, in the Moroccan migrant network there was social pressure for marriage, considered the norm to form a family, and women's work was intended mainly in a supporting role; “a burden”, “not a choice”. We should however remember the kind of unskilled, underpaid work performed by most of the female Moroccan workers in the destination country.

Conclusions

This article has contributed to studies on immigrants' care/work reconciliation strategies by considering some rather neglected dimensions: the gendered dynamics of living together; the transition to parenthood in the context of a receiving country that is not family friendly.

The ideals expressed by immigrant interviewees mainly concerned mother-centered care arrangements and "good fathers as providers". However, this article shows that there are tensions between these ideals and migrant agency, given the fact that under the same institutional, economic and cultural constraints immigrants enact different, flexible reconciliation practices. Findings consistent with previous studies in other countries (Kirk & Suvarierol, 2014; Morokvasic, 2007) showed that, although immigration may foster innovations and gender negotiation, the Italian receiving context appears to stand in the way of a less gendered division of responsibilities within couples. Although important economic shifts, gender care ideals changed modestly in most couples we studied (Menjívar, Abrego & Schmalzbauer, 2016).

However, cross-sectional studies on work/care arrangements very often conflate values and practices, and are likely to misinterpret the role of gender norms. We complemented reflections on gendered social reproduction and migration by identifying how factors encouraging gender negotiation, for example female (dominated) migration circuits/networks, the migration history of mothers and fathers, and their occupational status, interact over time.

We argue that gendered care narratives can be used to bridge the gap between ideals and practices.

Gender narratives are part of wider "adaptive" discourses which give sense and legitimize the individual's (and couple's) "caregiving capacity" and decisions over time, as well as their representation of "self" as "good parents". Within this framework, narratives are relatively coherent, stable accounts for reducing or justifying the gaps between the ideal sphere (including the comprehensive and interrelated set of values, ideal models, but also expectations) and concrete everyday practices. Moreover, narratives position individuals and couples in their social – transnational – space. Since most of our participants became parents for the first time in Italy, their narratives typically change after the first child is born. Minor shifts are detectable after this event, for example in relation to parents' work situations.

These results suggest that the cumulative effects of resources and (gendered) narratives may structure the future options available to the parents when the children grow up and requires further investigation. They also prompt investigation into whether similar processes are influencing the "re-traditionalisation" processes observed in northern European and

American countries, where high-skilled and professional mothers, in the transition to parenthood, may decide not to comply with neoliberal "adult worker" expectations.

Several policy-related implications emerge. Given the high occupational instability of many migrant fathers, the transition from dual-earner couples to single-income families increases the risk of vulnerability (and may hamper the occupational mobility prospects of migrant mothers and fathers). The reconciliation strategies observed appear to contribute to the reproduction of inequalities among individuals, families and social groups, with long-term consequences for reproductive choices and family trajectories. Stereotypes concerning culturally oppressed migrant women mask both the creative solutions performed by migrant families, and the effects of Western receiving countries, where the lack of support for families is at odds with ideals regarding gender equality and intensive parenthood.

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