Surviving underground: irregular migrants, Italian families, invisible welfare

The aim of this article, which focuses on the Italian case and its domestic and care sector, is to highlight two aspects. The first concerns the interaction among unauthorised migrants, the demand of their labour on the one hand and the other social actors they meet during their settling process on the other hand. The second concerns the nature of the irregularity of their condition, which is dynamic and often transient. Despite the increasingly fierce declarations, the reality does not correspond to the claims regarding control of the migration flows. Recognised or disguised forms of tolerance with only occasional implementation of severe measures – such as deportation – and regularisation processes of different kinds and with different purposes seem to be more the rule than the exception in Italy, as in other developed countries.

Introduction

Between 1996 and 2008, about 5–6 million migrants [International Centre for Migration Policy Development (ICMPD) 2009] in the European Union (EU) have gone from having an irregular status to a regular one. Twenty-two EU countries out of 27 have adopted various measures of regularisation. Therefore, the irregular condition has become a temporary and changeable status for many migrants. It often involves considerable difficulties and suffering; nevertheless, migrants might also consider it to be a stage in a process, the price to pay for entering a world of hope and opportunities (Ambrosini, 2010).

The same concept of illegal immigration can also be seen as ‘a legal, political and social construct of the twentieth century, which has only gained prominence during the latter third. It is a blurred concept; it is loaded with ideological import; it is highly politicised’ (Düvell, 2006: 29).

In this context, Italy is the EU country that has granted the largest number of regularisations, through six amnesties in 22 years and through other covert forms of regularisation. For example, the four amnesties granted between 1986 and 1998 involved 790,000 people; a further 630,000 were regularised in 2002; 300,000 applications are now under evaluation (regularisation of 2009); and many other migrants have been legalised by immigration quotas.

In Italy, as in other countries, a significant number of regular and irregular migrants are employed as domestic workers, babysitters or carers of elderly people in native-born families (Andall, 2000; Parreñas, 2001). The system of care services is still based largely on families and women, although there is an increasing participation of women in the labour market outside the home despite the growing number of elderly in need of care. This has led to the growth of an informal welfare system in which waged immigrant women enter Italian families, as they do in the rest of Southern Europe and elsewhere, to help them carry out the many tasks socially assigned to women (Jordan, 2006). As employers, the families are the main actors in the regularisation process, having been involved in hiring unregistered migrants and in managing the migrants’ underground work, especially that of the women, as they welcome and accommodate them in their homes. The last amnesty (2009) concerned exclusively this sector, which confirms the fact that the work of immigrants, including irregular ones, in Italian families is considered necessary and that they are hardly ever punished.
The objective of this study was to analyse the survival practices and resources of undocumented migrants working in Italian families, and the paths they have taken to gain the status of regular residents. The study was based on research conducted in this field over the years 2003 to 2010.

**Methodology**

The results presented in this article came from a series of studies conducted in northern Italy, in the regions of Lombardy and Liguria. The following list is a summary of the main methodological aspects of the research:

(1) Research into the regularisation process in the years 2002–2003, based on 420 interviews using questionnaires with migrant workers, both men and women, who were directly involved in the procedures (116 domestic workers, 159 company employees and 131 unemployed at the time of the interview), carried out in Milan in 2003 in centres and organisations (e.g., Caritas, trade unions) that offer migrants advice and support in submitting applications for regularisation, plus 14 qualitative interviews with employers in the families and an additional 13 qualitative interviews with company employees (Ambrosini & Salati, 2004).

(2) Qualitative research conducted in 2004 on the work of immigrant women in the ‘living in’ home care of elderly Italians in the areas of Milan and Brescia (Lombardy region). The following people were interviewed: 11 members of staff from centres of mediation for employment supply and demand [mainly non-governmental organisations (NGOs), voluntary associations and services related to trade unions]; 17 foreign workers aged between 24 and 50 years coming mainly from Eastern Europe and Latin America; five elderly people with carers; and 14 Italian carers (mainly daughters of elderly people requiring carers) (Ambrosini & Cominelii, 2005).

(3) A survey of female migration and transnational families conducted in Genoa and the Liguria region in 2009, based on 300 structured questionnaires administered to immigrant women with minor children who were still living at home or who had been recently reunited with their family (178 from the Andean region, 52 from Eastern Europe, 41 from new EU member countries and the rest from other countries), found through social services, NGOs, trade unions, and who, in two cases out of three, were employed in the home care field, and 30 in-depth interviews with Latin American women and men with experience of transnational family ties (Ambrosini & Abbatecola, 2010).

(4) Research on transnational families, family reunions and teenage children, conducted in Lombardy in 2008–2009 and based on questionnaires administered to 422 parents (165 women and 257 men); 432 questionnaires administered to children, found in various ways and coming from different countries; 25 life stories of migrant mothers (16 Latin American, five Eastern European, four African); and 26 qualitative interviews with adolescents of immigrant origin (14 Latin American, the others from different countries) (Ambrosini, Bonizzoni & Caneva, 2010).

Other data were drawn from the surveys carried out each year in Lombardy by the Regional Observatory for Integration and Multi-ethnicity (Osservatorio regionale per l’integrazione e la multietnicità) on a representative sample of 9,000 immigrants.

From these research studies, carried out in the pursuit of different objectives, several of the results are presented here to illustrate the issues under consideration.

**Entering and leaving an irregular condition**

The first step in the analysis is to focus on the causes of irregular migration. We should note that a social and political construction of the phenomenon is involved, that is, that the host societies have the power to define certain processes of human mobility across national boundaries as illegal. Having made this clarification, three groups of causes can be identified.

First of all, there are economic reasons, according to which labour markets attract workers who do not have any rights and who are completely flexible and exploitable. The economics of ‘otherness’, which Calavita (2005) discussed in reference to the Italian and Spanish cases, reaches its peak here. The tendencies towards the labour market’s liberalisation, the increased use of outsourcing and the reduction of public social protection all encourage the use of undocumented migrants, in contrast to the declared commitment to close national borders (Rea, 2010). The gap between a labour market that requires a cheap workforce and a policy that announces border closure is often seen as an important cause of irregular migration (Cornelius, Martin & Hollifield, 1994). Indeed, for some scholars, this outcome is consciously sought by political and economic actors in order to have workers who are not protected by law or by collective agreements (Baldwin-Edwards, 2001). The pre-existence of large sections of the informal economy, rarely challenged by public authorities, promotes the absorption of illegal immigrants on the lower rungs of the economic system (Triandafyllidou & Kosic, 2006).

Second, contrasting interests and inconsistencies in the regulation policy can be identified: the ‘liberal constraint’ that requires the protection of human rights (Boswell, 2007; Hollifield, 1992); the interests of some...
sectors (e.g., tourism or international trade); and the scarce resources allocated for the implementation of policies of control in comparison with the phenomenon’s dimension (Ambrosini, 2008). Thus, governments are more uncertain and contradictory, more articulated and under greater pressure than they would like to be (Penninx & Doomernik, 1998).

A third explanation of irregular migration refers to the immigrants’ agency and its networks. This issue is explicitly or implicitly addressed in most literature on ‘globalisation from below’ (see Sassen, 2007; Smith & Guarnizo, 1998/2003), solidarity and mutual aid among relatives and countrymen (Portes & Rumbaut, 2006), and transnational migrations (Balibar, 2006; Glick Schiller, Basch & Blanc-Szanton, 1992; Ossman, 2007). These studies emphasise the migrants’ efforts to improve their living conditions and to evade the restrictions on mobility imposed by the host societies (Rea, 2010). Sympathetic attention has been given to the strategies used to circumvent the rules – to the survival strategies, and to the ethnic community’s solidarity which allows its members to move around and to take refuge – in order to enter the interstices of the host country’s economy in the struggle to gain rights and some form of citizenship (Sassen, 2007).

The second step refers to the reasons why the domestic and caring sector, in particular, attracts irregular migrants, especially in Italy and in Southern Europe (Baldwin-Edwards & Arango, 1999; King & Black, 1997; Ribas-Mateos, 2004; for Spain: Solé & Flaquer, 2005), and also elsewhere (Anderson, 2000; Düvell, 2009; Van Valsum 2010; Widding Isaksen, Devi & Hochschild, 2008). From a sociological perspective, one can speak of a post-industrial society that retrieves and revitalises pre-industrial labour relations, enabling native women to continue their professional careers while maintaining their traditional roles as family managers, compensating for the shortcomings of support from the state and in the sharing of housework (Ambrosini, 2008; Andall, 2000).

On the other hand, it should be mentioned that domestic work conveniently and easily meets four needs of migrants who do not have the documents they need in order to settle, to move around freely and to look for a job within the host countries. It offers a safe house, a job, a chance to save money and some level of protection from controls carried out by the authorities. On this latter point, Triandafyllidou and Kosic (2006: 122) observed that ‘the nature of their work, which confines them in the home of the family, renders both them and their employers less exposed to police checks on violations of immigration and labour law’.

In many developed countries, families are one of the main sources of attraction for labour migration. As we have already mentioned, the Italian case is particularly emblematic of the growth of a parallel welfare system, which is informal and half-hidden, especially in home care for the elderly, assisted 24 hours a day by immigrants, usually women, who live with them under the same roof. This solution is seen as cheaper and as more respectful of the habits and dignity of the elderly than placing them in sheltered housing. Therefore, it has become widespread both socially and geographically. According to recent estimates, the number of workers employed in the sector is about 1 million (ISMU News, 17 December 2010). The immigrant domestic servant is no longer a status symbol for wealthy families in large cities; he/she is now also found in small towns and in working-class neighbourhoods, working for pensioners in low- and middle-income brackets, and in the most remote villages of the peninsula, including the south. Another implication is the high incidence of irregular situations: the need for assistance often occurs suddenly and cannot wait for the complex authorisation procedures required for the entry of new workers. Furthermore, an irregular immigrant costs less, is more flexible and makes fewer demands. Moreover, a person who has just arrived, who does not know the language and who has few or no social contacts is the most willing candidate to undertake hard work, but with the advantage of having board and lodging. Therefore, the marginal foreigners, the ‘Others’, par excellence, become the most useful in daily practices (Calavita, 2005).

In addition, employers do not usually welcome strangers from abroad into their homes and formally hire them, entrusting them with their most beloved and defenceless family members. Consequently, in the domestic sector, it is common, at least initially, to hire immigrants who still do not have the required documents as a kind of tryout. At the same time, it is difficult to blame employers, such as families who need someone to take care of their elderly and children. In a way, undocumented immigrants’ work can be considered socially useful and even necessary (Ambrosini & Cominelli, 2005).

However, these particular labour relations also come at a cost, especially in terms of private life and leisure time. They require considerable emotional commitment, resulting from the implicit task of listening, keeping someone company and offering emotional support. Italian families buy work, but they actually demand affection.

Another major problem for the migrants is being separated from their families, especially from their children. The irregular condition prevents migrants from leaving and going back to their home countries. In a sense, it makes them prisoners in the receiving country. Undocumented women who work as domestic workers in native families are the key actors in the formation of transnational families and long-distance emotional ties, an issue that is being addressed by the growing amount of international literature (see e.g.,
In the domestic and care sector, as in other sectors, it is possible to identify intensive processes in the formation of ethnic niches, with the very rapid grouping of migrants of the same nationality. Clusters of Filipinos, Peruvians, Ecuadorians, Ukrainians and Moldavians have found jobs in this sector, in varying degrees of concentration according to different local labour markets, where a group can be more numerous than another depending on date of arrival and success in the entry process. For example, Genoa has been experiencing for some years a strong concentration of South-American migrants, especially Ecuadorians, while in Naples and in the Campania region, the Ukrainian group is generally the most numerous.

Besides Filipinos and Sri Lankans, who are employed as servants and maids by middle- and upper-class families, most of the immigrant women start to work in the sector that involves the most demanding activities, that is, providing live-in care for the elderly; then they switch to domestic housekeeper duties, especially domestic jobs paid by the hour, which implies autonomy in their accommodation and more freedom in their private life. In many cases, this transition coincides with access to official immigration status.

At the same time, reliance on networks, which is stronger at the beginning of the process and for those with irregular status, tends to decrease with the passing of time as knowledge of the language and the labour market improves and social contacts are broadened (Hagan, 1998). Therefore, daily or weekly appointments and meeting places emerge locally, providing contact between compatriots and intermediaries who mediate between labour demand and supply, and even offer forms of economic exchange through the sale of jobs.

Confirming the results of several other research studies regarding different national groups, Vianello (2009) described in some detail the practice, carried out by Ukrainian women, of selling useful contacts to find a job, with prices varying according to the type of job offered. The care of a seriously ill person is more tiring so it is worth less than a job as housekeeper or babysitter. Prices vary between €100 and half of the first salary (€300–€400). Only family and strong friendship ties are exempt from this financial bargaining (called blat, a term meaning barter), and even then, they are not always exempt. According to Vianello (2009), it is a kind of monetisation of reciprocity relations, whose origin lies in the crisis of post-Soviet societies, and it has spread into emigration phenomena due to lax social control. Lagomarsino (2006) had already found a similar outcome when studying Ecuadorian immigrants in Genoa, documenting the sale not only of jobs but also of accommodation.

In parallel, we can observe the formation of stereotypes in Italian families, with immigrants of certain

### Survival resources and practices

Eight classes of resources can be identified within this area of employment. When combined, these resources allow undocumented immigrants to survive, to integrate to some extent in the receiving society and to prepare the ground for applying for regularised status. All immigrants share a number of resources; some resources are easier to activate for women working in the domestic and care system, while others are specific to these women’s particular social conditions.

In the first group, we can identify networks. There is ample international literature to show the long-standing importance of networks for the arrival and settlement of new immigrants (Bashi, 2007; Hagan, 1998; Massey & Espinosa, 1997; Massey et al., 1998; Portes, 1995). Migrants with irregular status depend more on their networks than regular residents do, when seeking employment or finding accommodation, for gathering information and for many other needs (van Meeteren, 2010). Networks promote and organise the arrival of unauthorised migrants, providing varying degrees of help with varying degrees of self-interest depending on whether they consist of close relatives, friends or strangers. In sociological terms, we can say that social capital is of paramount importance for irregular migrants (van Meeteren, Engbersen & van Sal, 2009).

In our research on transnational and rejoined families conducted in the Liguria region, of the 300 women interviewed, eight out of 10 had arrived alone, relying on the support of a social network consisting of relatives and compatriots. Around half of them relied on relatives, the other half on friends and acquaintances (Erminio, 2010).

In previous research concerning immigrants living in Milan who were involved in the 2002 amnesty, more than 60 per cent of them stated that they had found their current job through the help of relatives and friends. In the domestic and care sector, the rate is even higher (65.5%). We also have to take into consideration the help provided by Italian friends (8.6%) and by religious or charitable institutions (5.6%) (Ambrosini & Salati, 2004).

In the domestic and care sector, as in other sectors, it is possible to identify intensive processes in the formation of ethnic niches, with the very rapid grouping of migrants of the same nationality. Clusters of Filipinos, Peruvians, Ecuadorians, Ukrainians and Moldavians have found jobs in this sector, in varying degrees of concentration according to different local labour markets, where a group can be more numerous than another depending on date of arrival and success in the entry process. For example, Genoa has been experiencing for some years a strong concentration of South-American migrants, especially Ecuadorians, while in Naples and in the Campania region, the Ukrainian group is generally the most numerous.

Besides Filipinos and Sri Lankans, who are employed as servants and maids by middle- and upper-class families, most of the immigrant women start to work in the sector that involves the most demanding activities, that is, providing live-in care for the elderly; then they switch to domestic housekeeper duties, especially domestic jobs paid by the hour, which implies autonomy in their accommodation and more freedom in their private life. In many cases, this transition coincides with access to official immigration status.

At the same time, reliance on networks, which is stronger at the beginning of the process and for those with irregular status, tends to decrease with the passing of time as knowledge of the language and the labour market improves and social contacts are broadened (Hagan, 1998). Therefore, daily or weekly appointments and meeting places emerge locally, providing contact between compatriots and intermediaries who mediate between labour demand and supply, and even offer forms of economic exchange through the sale of jobs.
nationalities being considered particularly suitable for carrying out certain activities, and therefore being favoured over others simply because of their country of origin. In studies of labour economics, this phenomenon is known as 'statistical discrimination': a characteristic, whether positive or negative, observed in some components of a particular social group, is applied to the whole group, favouring or penalising their chances of being hired or promoted. Thus, simply the place of origin can become a passport for entry into the domestic and care sector or, in other cases, an obstacle.

A second resource that irregular immigrants employed in the home care sector share with other unauthorised immigrants is work. Work is the cornerstone of the settlement practices of undocumented migrants in countries where participation in the labour market is the main, and often the only, source of legitimisation for the newcomers.

For women, domestic work is their main employment opportunity, particularly for those who do not have a regular residence permit. According to the extensive research carried out in 2009 by the Regional Observatory on Integration and Multi-ethnicity in Lombardy, irregular migrants in Lombardy were estimated at between 117,000 and 190,000, or 13 per cent of the total foreigner population residing in the region. Over 16 per cent of irregular migrants worked as domestic care workers or babysitters, and 13.3 per cent provided domestic help (Sciotrino, 2010). Considering that the data do not separate workers by gender, and that 31 per cent of the sample are classified in the category ‘other jobs’, we can say that undocumented migrant women are heavily concentrated in the domestic and care sector.

In the research carried out in the Liguria region, we pointed out that the phenomenon occurs even more extensively, considering the difficult conditions of the local labour market, and two women out of three who were interviewed worked in the domestic and care sector as carers for the elderly (43%) or provided domestic help (23%) (Erminio, 2010).

However, there is also a qualitative difference in the social representation of domestic work compared with other jobs. Domestic and care work is perceived as socially useful, but it is hardly ever recognised as a real job; it is an integral part of daily life, but it has no clearly defined boundaries, either in terms of tasks or of working hours, leading not only to serious forms of abuse and exploitation but also to the development of friendships and emotional bonds. Apparently, the job requires no special skills and qualifications because it is presumed that it consists of performing traditional care and housekeeping activities that are culturally assigned to women.

Although it decreases as regularisation approaches, the concentration of immigrant women working in the domestic and care sector remains high. We can say that although the acquisition of a regular status implies an increase in bargaining power, furthers access to better working conditions, allows immigrants to achieve autonomy and favours the reuniting of families, it offers a real opportunity for professional upgrading to only some workers.

In general, considering the continual flow of new immigrant women who start from the bottom, that is, from irregular employment conditions in the domestic and care sector, we have not observed many signs of progress. According to the survey conducted by the Regional Observatory for Integration and Multi-ethnicity in 2009 in Lombardy, 18.7 per cent of immigrant women (with both regular and irregular status) worked as domestic care workers, 16.2 per cent as hourly paid domestic workers, 6.5 per cent as live-in domestic workers, 5.1 per cent as housekeepers and 2.7 per cent as babysitters. Compared with the year 2001, only a few changes can be noted: more jobs are now classified as ‘care’, while fewer jobs are classified as merely ‘domestic help’, but this fact may depend on the greater visibility obtained through care work for the elderly as time goes on, a job which previously was very often confused with mere housework (Blangiardo, 2010).

A third resource that domestic and care workers have in common with other irregular migrants is access to some public services. Undocumented immigrants are by definition the weakest group in terms of enforceable rights. In the ‘civic stratification’ (Morris, 2002), they occupy the lowest position. However, the ‘liberal constraint’ to be met by countries wishing to be regarded as complying with international conventions obliges them to acknowledge certain rights, such as emergency medical treatment and education for children. These rights are part of the package of resources that allow undocumented immigrants to survive in and enter the receiving societies, waiting to emerge into the sunlight.

Today, however, in Italy and elsewhere, certain government policies are an attempt to undermine undocumented immigrants’ access to public services, with the support of public opinion, despite the opposition of NGOs and the resistance of many professionals in the same services. This is a component of the internal control strategies against irregular immigration (van Meeteren, 2010). Thus, a daily battle sees confrontation between the institutions of control and the staff of educational, assistance and health services who are often inclined to ‘cheat the legislator honestly’, that is, to give undocumented immigrants (and those in a transient or uncertain status) access to services (Zincone, 1999). Local level bureaucracies play a salient role here, interpreting the rules, giving useful information, helping to fill in the application forms and, most of all, deciding on the eligibility of the applications (Campomori, 2007).
A difference can be found between domestic workers and other irregular migrants; sponsored and accompanied by their Italian employers, domestic workers manage to access certain public institutions more easily (mainly health care), obtain information and benefit from services they need. Where interpretative and discretionary margins can be found, employers mediate, insist and protest, bringing into play their knowledge and ability to influence operators and decision makers.

A fourth resource, in theory equally available to all migrants in an irregular situation, is support from various solidarity institutions. Valuable resources for survival and the shift to a regular status originate from the relationship with institutions that offer solidarity, such as religious organisations, trade unions and various associations. Health care, for example, is provided in cases of urgent need by public hospitals, but most of the usual services are provided through NGO surgeries where doctors work as volunteers. Several charities offer free meals to anyone in need, most of whom are undocumented immigrants. Many associations and religious organisations offer language courses which meet the needs of those who do not have access to courses offered by the public system. Regularisation paperwork is handled by services set up by the trade unions, Caritas and other organisations. In the research concerning workers involved in the 2002 amnesty, 54.9 per cent declared that they had received some kind of help from Italian civil society organisations, for example, information about regularisation procedures (23.4%), free lunches (21.7%), Italian language courses (12.3%) and hospitality in homeless shelters (12.3%) (Ambrosini & Salati, 2004).

Lastly, we must remember the political role played by these institutions in an overall negative context. These include advocacy organisations, which lobby for amnesties and protest against legislative measures designed to affect immigrants.

Here, too, Italian families often act as intermediaries when accessing these services, providing information, guidance and so forth. In this way, domestic workers frequently enjoy the benefit of receiving quicker answers and better treatment.

A fifth paradoxical resource for all irregular migrants consists of the lack of effectiveness of the repressive apparatus. One of the reasons for the continuous flow of undocumented migrants, and the necessity for amnesties, is the modest results of the interception, detention and deportation system. The Italian case is particularly interesting because of the gap between the claims of political representatives and actual results. In 2009, out of an estimated 500,000 undocumented immigrants, there were only about 14,000 expulsions, that is, less than 3 per cent. There are about 1,800 places available in the whole country in the Identification and Expulsion Centres for the detention of immigrants waiting for deportation, and the actual rate of expulsion of inmates in 2009 was 38 per cent, lower than in the previous years (Caritas-Migrantes, 2010).

When it comes to women engaged in household chores and care, the unwritten rule is almost that of a generalised tolerance. One could say that they are not treated politically nor perceived socially as illegal migrants. The windows of opportunity opened up by amnesties or regularisations represent the other side of the coin of the limited effectiveness of deterrence: the strategy of irregular migrants is to evade controls, wait patiently for a favourable opportunity and, finally, take advantage of the right moment to regularise. As already mentioned, Italian regularisations have mainly favoured care workers and the domestic and care sector; the last one, in 2009, was restricted exclusively to them, in explicit and official terms.

A sixth resource, one that is not exclusive but is more accessible to women who live and work in Italian families, refers to emotional ties and marriage alliances, that is, the establishment of sentimental relationships with Italian men, sometimes leading to marriage. It is generally known that women who migrate alone have often left behind broken families or are widows or single parents (Banfi & Boccagni, 2009). Many of them migrate in order to attend to their children’s needs as they do not have the support of a partner. In other cases, the departure is a socially acceptable way of ending a relationship that is no longer working.

In our research on transnational and rejoined families in Lombardy, we pointed out that only 43.3 per cent of the women interviewed, who have under-age children in the homeland or who have rejoined their families (N = 165), declare themselves ‘married’, while another 13.4 per cent report living with a partner (Ambrosini et al., 2010). According to the research on this same issue carried out in the Liguria region, 31.3 per cent of the women in the sample (N = 300), all of whom have under-age children in the homeland or in Italy, are separated or divorced, 12.5 per cent of them are unmarried and 5.1 per cent are widows. Almost half of them, therefore, are officially available on the ‘marriage market’ (Ambrosini & Abbatecola, 2010).

An analysis of the in-depth interviews reveals that even though the presence of under-age children can be an obstacle for the establishment of lasting relationships, seeking an Italian partner is a strategy used in order to acquire a regular status and to improve their own and their children’s standard of living. A typical case is marriage to one of the sons of the elderly person they are looking after. Usually, the men are older than the immigrants and have previous marriages.

The use of marriage as a strategy for regularisation, however, has aroused the concern of the government. Until 2009, legislation had traditionally been generous
towards Italian citizens’ foreign spouses, who quickly acquired citizenship, but the new rules introduced in 2009 have placed a serious obstacle in the way of undocumented residents: they are excluded from civil acts, including marriage. This represents another form of ‘internal control’.1

However, despite the law, love affairs and relationships continue to occur, inside and outside the home. These relationships can produce situations of domination, deceit, even violence, or they may be a major vehicle for social integration, despite status and power asymmetries (Peruzzi, 2009). From a strictly legal point of view, marriage in Italy offers the fastest way of getting access to citizenship: even in 2008, over 60 per cent of naturalisations were obtained through marriage; among these cases, more than seven out of 10 concern foreign women who married Italian men, on average about 10 years their senior. It was only in 2009 that, for the first time, naturalisations by residence (22,162, of which 63.4% were for men) exceeded naturalisations by marriage (17,122, of which 13,169 were for women, equivalent to 76.9%) (Caritas-Migrant, 2010).

In the research on transnational families carried out in Lombardy (Ambrosini et al., 2010), we found some interesting cases, one of which is Veronica, a single mother with three children. Two of them joined her in Italy and, especially for the arrival of the second child, the help she received from the much older Italian man she married was crucial. At the moment, the former partner of the first son and the granddaughter also live with them.

The case of Elisabeth is slightly different. She had problems bringing her son over, and he arrived in Italy at the age of 13. Partly because of difficulties in the relationship with her new Italian partner, she preferred to send him back to Ecuador. However, the son later became convinced that he had better opportunities in Italy and returned. The family’s reunion was possible, despite the son being over 18 years old, because the mother was married to an Italian (Ambrosini et al., 2010): we can say that Italian men often have to pay a price, in terms of new roles and family responsibilities, for their desire to establish a stable relationship with a mother was married to an Italian (Ambrosini et al., 2010). We can quote two testimonies from our latest research concerning transnational and rejoined families (Ambrosini et al., 2010):

When my daughter arrived, the lady I worked for let her stay in her house. She [my daughter] stayed there for four months. Then I said, ‘I will face up to my responsibilities, I will find a house’, and they helped me, they gave me a helping hand and I rented a house. (Rosa, Ecuador)

Gradually my husband also started to go there, more and more often, and my employer understood that he was a good person too (. . .). He [the employer] grew fond of me because his daughters were far away and he seldom saw them, only during the holidays, he actually had only us [with him] and in April I went back to him, he provided a double bed and I stayed there with my husband. (Tatiana, Moldavian)

The support of the Italian employer families and the overlapping of family and work relations help to explain another phenomenon: women increasingly tend to be the first to migrate, especially those belonging to those national groups that are more active in the domestic and care sector. Husbands, if there are any, often arrive later, but only in less than one case out of five through the normal process of family rejoining: 52.4 per cent of the husbands entered Italy with a tourist

---

1 A very recent sentence of the Constitutional Court (July 2011) has cancelled this rule, but has not erased the political will associated with it.
Finally, the involvement in some kinds of family relationships with the Italian families that employ them may also respond, to a certain extent, to the emotional needs of the migrants themselves, who are separated from their loved ones. As an immigrant working woman remarked:

*I’m doing fine here, very fine, they are good, because they are like my family, because I (…) do not have anybody here, I did not have any friends, I did not know any fellow citizens (…) : I have found the family I didn’t have.* (Ambrosini & Cominelli, 2005: 171)

This phenomenon, however, has another consequence: even when it does not imply hidden forms of exploitation, it shifts the working relationship to a different level, creating mutual ties and obligations that can become difficult to manage and to untangle. When an immigrant working woman decides to change her job, perhaps after being helped in regularising her juridical position, employers very often interpret this choice as a betrayal of trust: it implies a breach of personal relations, too. It may appear to be more a conflictual family separation than the normal conclusion of a working relationship.

The eighth and last resource lies more in the psychosocial order. We can call it, taking the cue from Bryceson and Vuorela (2002), caring and frontiering. The everyday life of migrants in irregular status cannot be separated from their concern for their loved ones left at home, especially their children. We could say that a resource that helps them to tolerate their difficult situation is the awareness of being able to ensure a better life for those they love, maintaining contact with them, despite the distance. The support of the substitute caregivers, especially maternal grandmothers, plays a vital role, although it is not always sufficient to fill the void left by the departure of the mother and the insufficient presence of fathers (Widdig et al., 2008).

Communication with caregivers and transmission of affection to their children are important aspects of the daily life of migrant women. This concern has noteworthy practical implications. People, particularly women, engaged in household chores and live-in care are important suppliers of remittances due to their ability to save money, regardless of their legal status. In the research carried out in the Liguria region, 83 per cent of the women regularly sent remittances to their relatives in their homeland, to the tune of €300 each month on average, which is around one-third of the salary; but this amount can increase to over 60 per cent of the salary when women live with the employer family (Ambrosini & Abbatecola, 2010).

They also use courier services that connect Italian cities to many destinations in Eastern Europe, through which they send money, gifts, letters and so forth (Ambrosini, 2009). But they also have to heal the pain of separation that extends over time, often beyond expectations. Telephone services, thanks to the widespread availability of mobile phones and to the increasingly lower costs, are an essential aid, but the use of new communication technologies is also gradually developing.

The difficulty of living in under precarious conditions and with few rights is offset by the expectation of being able to meet the needs of their children at home, to support them in their studies and possibly to arrange for their arrival at a later stage.

**The irregular stay as a transient condition?**

The phenomenon of irregular immigration results from the interaction between the movement across borders of people with ‘weak’ nationalities and the border control implemented by the states. The concept of illegal immigration, therefore, appears multifaceted, changing over time and from one country to another, and it is not easy to define [International Centre for Migration Policy Development (ICMPD), 2009]. As we have observed, irregular migrants in Italy mainly enter the country with a legal visa, and then they fall into an irregular condition, especially if they have an informal job. In the end, most of them are able to emerge as authorised workers and residents. Domestic and care workers are the most accepted and most eligible to obtain a regularised position. We can say, therefore, that the irregular immigrant, especially a working one, incorporated in a context of family relationships, seems to be a transitional figure, waiting for legalisation, rather than a rule breaker destined to be punished and sent back to his/her own country. The waiting period tends to protract, a grey area of ‘liminal legality’ grows (Menjívar, 2006), suffering increases, but the direction does not change. National boundaries, entry authorisation procedures, residence permits and definitions of regular and irregular conditions all show that they have a conventional origin and a flexible configuration.

In light of the results presented here, the plight of irregular migrants employed in domestic and care work can be observed as a pathway. In our research on transnational and rejoined families, only 16.8 per cent of the interviewed adults entered Italy with a residence permit. The rest have all been involved in more or less long-term experiences of informal work and non-authorised residence (Ambrosini et al., 2010).

In the case of Greece, Glytsos (2005) identified a sort of ascending trajectory of the migrant status, beginning with a ‘state of illegality’, moving on to a ‘temporary amnesty’, then to ‘legalisation under
© 2011 The Author(s)  

entwined with other factors: the sponsorship of ethnic networks, the protection accorded by Italian families and the support of several solidarity institutions. In this article, I have tried to explain how the irregular migrants can settle, work, look for the opportunity to legalise their status and follow the regularisation procedures.

In contrast, the repressive actions, more effective at the borders, are more expensive (in economic and social terms) and difficult to implement throughout the country, and they often seem to be quite random and sporadic displays of authority made by sovereign states. These are focused mainly on reassuring domestic public opinion with adequately advertised international agreements, the tightening up of regulations and reinforcement of control practices, in an attempt to address the demand to defend the social order. These demands, at the same time, are fomented by political actors in a top-down process. In recent years, Italy has been an exemplary case.

However, referring to Rea (2010), we can argue that receiving states have ‘three hands’: With the first one, by liberalising labour markets and increasing the possibilities of subcontracting, they create conditions that favour the use of undocumented workers; with the second one, they proclaim a merciless fight against illegal immigration; and with the third hand, states mitigate the contradiction through regularising measures. Heavily stigmatised, the irregular migrants become a component of the social organisation, and eventually, if they manage to avoid controls or effective measures of detection, they become normal residents and even citizens. Despite increasingly fierce declarations, the reality does not match the claims made regarding control of the migration flows. Recognised or disguised forms of tolerance (Vasta, 2008), only occasional implementation of hard measures – such as deportation – and regularisation processes of different types and with different purposes seem to be more the rule than the exception in Italy as in other developed countries.

At the same time, in the public discourse, irregular migrants are the subject of conflicting. Most of the literature treat them as victims, considering the economic and political conditions that force them to move and then segregate them into working niches, being subject to exploitation and without rights. Public opinion generally considers them ‘clandestine’, violators of borders and rule breakers of the territorial state sovereignty, thus villains (Anderson, 2008). Others consider them as a kind of romantic heroes, defeating an unfair political regulation of human mobility through their ability to exploit and take advantage of interstices and ladders in the control procedures (e.g., Tarrius, 2002).

Without overestimating rationality and strategic abilities, which in many cases prove to be not very effective, we can regard migrants as persons struggling...
for a better life against a system of constraints, embedded in networks, sponsored by native families and solidarity institutions. The condition of irregular migrants, despite its difficulties, is therefore not an objective fact, not a ‘landlocked’ destiny, but rather can be seen as a painful journey towards a desirable future. Receiving countries should ask themselves whether it is fair to demand such a price for letting migrants work and live legally in their territory.

References


Hagan J (1998). Social Networks, Gender and Immigrant Incor-