

Undocumented Migrants and Invisible Welfare: Survival Practices in the Domestic Environment

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Abstract

In Italy, as in other countries, a significant number of migrants are employed as domestic workers, baby-sitters or carers of elderly people in Italian families (Parreñas 2001). Many of them begin as irregular migrants, but they manage to accede to a regular status: Italy is the EU country that has granted the highest number of regularizations, through six amnesties in 22 years, and other forms of hidden regularization. As employers, the families are the main actors in the regularization process. In many other situations, they are involved in hiring unregistered migrants and in managing the migrants' underground work, especially that of women, as they welcome and accommodate them in their homes. This paper aims to explore the hidden world of the survival practices and social integration of undocumented migrants employed in Italian families, showing how most of them can obtain a regular status, after a period of hard work and a difficult life, turning it into a transient stage in the migrant's career.

Keywords: Illegal migration, domestic workers, regularisations, Italy.

Domestic work and irregular migration

We know that host societies have the power to define certain processes of human mobility across national boundaries as illegal. But these processes continue to flow, in spite of increased controls and sanctions. We can identify three groups of causes.

First of all, economic reasons, according to which the labour markets attract a labour force that does not have any rights, and which is completely flexible and exploitable. The tendencies towards the labour market's liberalization, the increased use of outsourcing and the reduction of public social protection all promote the use of undocumented migrants, in contrast with the declared commitment to closing the borders (Rea, 2010). The gap between the labour market that requires a cheap workforce and the policy that announces border closure is often seen as an important cause of irregular migration. Indeed, for some scholars this effect is consciously sought by political and economic powers, in order to have workers who are not protected by law or by collective agreements.

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Secondly, contrasting interests and incongruities in the regulation policy could be identified: the liberal constraint that requires the protection of human rights (Boswell, 2007), the interests of some sectors (e.g. tourism or international trade) and the scarce resources allocated to implement the policies of control in relation to the phenomenon's dimension (Ambrosini, 2008a). Thus, countries are more uncertain and contradictory, more articulated and under more pressure than they would like to be (Penninx and Doornik, 1998).

A third explanation of irregular migration refers to the immigrants' agency and their networks. This issue is emphasized by a wealth of literature about "the globalization from below" (Smith and Guarnizo, 2003), that covers the studies on ethnic networks (Massey and Espinosa, 1997), a large number of approaches on transnational migration (Glick Schiller et al., 1992; Portes, 2003), research by French sociologists and anthropologists on "bazaar economies" and informal business (Peraldi, 2002; Tarrius, 2002). These studies emphasize the migrants' efforts to improve their living conditions and to evade the restrictions on mobility that are imposed by the host societies (Rea, 2010). Sympathetic attention has been given to the strategies used to get around the rules, to the survival strategies, to the ethnic community's solidarity that allows them to move and to take refuge, to enter the interstices of the host country's economy.

The second step refers to the reasons why the domestic and caring sectors in particular attract irregular migrants, and not just in Italy and in southern Europe (Anderson, 2000; Widding Isaksen et al., 2008; Van Valsum, 2010). It should be mentioned that domestic work conveniently and easily meets four needs of migrants who do not have the necessary documents to settle, to move freely and to look for a job within the host countries: it offers a safe house, a job, a chance to save money and protection from controls carried out by the authorities.

On the demand side, this kind of work is needed to supplement and to underpin a system of social services that still hinges on the family and on unpaid female labour (Esping-Andersen, 1999; Sciortino, 2004). The increase in women's presence in the non-domestic labour market together with an increase in the number of elderly people requiring assistance, often on a long term basis, poor public services, the high cost of old people's homes all explain why Italian families increasingly turn to domestic workers and, particularly in the last few years, to carers of elderly people (Colombo, 2005). While Italian women are still in the minority of hourly paid domestic workers, live-in domestic workers and carers of the elderly who live with their charges are almost all immigrants. Most of them are women but they also include a growing number of men. The total number is estimated at one million people (Ismu news, 2010). It is necessary to add that the need for assistance often occurs suddenly, and cannot wait for the complex authorization procedures required for the entry of new manpower. In addition,

employers do not usually decide to welcome and hire an unknown person coming from abroad.

For the workers, these particular labour relations, however, imply huge costs: living in the same house as the family or as the elderly person, having very little private life; dealing with the balance between private life and the job, between working time and leisure time, between labour relations and interpersonal relations; meeting the demands of the job but also those related to the ability to listen, to keep someone company, to offer emotional support. Italian families buy work but they actually demand affection.

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Another great problem is separation from the families, especially from their children. The main obstacle for undocumented immigrants, in Italy and elsewhere, is the inability to go back home and then return to the country of immigration. The undocumented women who work as domestic workers in Italian families are the key actors in the formation of transnational families and long distance emotional ties, and much attention has been paid to this over the last few years (Banfi and Boccagni, 2009).

The hard work and compromised living conditions that these jobs involve produce certain consequences: over time, once they have obtained a residence permit, most workers try to get away from a live-in position, which is difficult to tolerate for a long time. The most common solution is a live-out domestic job, which allows workers to have some privacy in their lives again and for many it represents the chance to try to reunite with their families, or at least their children, formally or informally (Bonizzoni, 2009). Consequently, the domestic sector continues to attract new undocumented immigrants, who replace those who have left it.

On the political side, these working arrangements become the main reason for the amnesties to be introduced. In Italy, the last amnesty implemented in September 2009 with about 300,000 applications, was officially limited to the domestic and care sector, and gave families permission to regularize their immigrant undocumented employees.

Resources and practices of survival

Within this area of employment, I believe we can identify eight classes of resources that, when combined, allow undocumented immigrants to survive and wait for the possibility to become regular residents. It is necessary to underline that some of them are common to all the undocumented migrants (e.g. the support of migrant networks); others are available elsewhere, but are easier to find and activate for migrants living in Italian families, because of their proximity to their employers (e.g. the chance to gain access to some public services); a third group of resources are specific to domestic workers (e.g. familiarization).

a) *Networks*. The migrants with irregular status depend more on their networks than regular residents, in order to seek employment or to find

accommodation, to gather information and for many other needs. Networks promote and organize the arrival of unauthorized migrants, providing varying degrees of help with various levels of self-interest, depending on whether they consist of close relatives, friends or strangers. In the domestic sector, it is possible to identify intensive processes of "colonization", and the very rapid gathering of migrants of the same nationality. Therefore, locally, daily or weekly appointments and meeting places emerge, linking compatriots and intermediaries that mediate between labour demand and supply, and even forms of economic exchange, through the sale of jobs (Vianello, 2009). In parallel, we can observe the formation of stereotypes and forms of "statistic discrimination" among Italian families, with immigrants of certain nationalities considered particularly suitable for carrying out certain activities, and being therefore favoured over others only because of the country of origin.

b) *Work*. The cornerstone of the survival strategies of undocumented migrants is their participation in the labour market, in this case domestic care work. For women this is really their main employment opportunity, particularly for those who do not have a regular residence permit. This very special work is perceived as socially useful, but is hardly recognized as a real job: it is an integral part of daily life, but has no clearly defined boundaries, either in terms of tasks or of working hours, leading to serious forms of abuse and exploitation, but also to the development of relationships of friendship and affection. Apparently, it requires no special skills and qualifications, because it is presumed that the job consists of performing traditional activities of care and housekeeping that are culturally assigned to women. For this reason, as well as for economic reasons, employers have no hesitation in hiring newly arrived immigrant women who are not authorized to work, sometimes even men, especially when physical strength is required to lift or support the elderly. Attempts to set up training courses and professional registers to officially match demand and supply and to promote the hiring of authorized workers have so far had little success.

c) *Familiarization*. The particular characteristics of live-in care workers, especially when it involves the care of the elderly and children, lead to a change in interpersonal relationships. Employers and workers eat together, go out together for a walk, watch TV together, etc. The elderly expect their workers to relieve them of loneliness and depression, to substitute children and other relatives who cannot be as close to them as they would like. This question has ambivalent implications. It generates invasion of privacy, demands that exceed the normal work obligations and sometimes sexual harassment. But it also provides resources for migrants: firstly, the availability of several families to regularize them when the opportunity arises. Sometimes employers provide aid that goes well beyond their contractual obligations: for example, support for the reunification of spouses or children, allowing them even to stay at their home, or the concession to stay in the

house after the death of the elderly person and the expiry of the working relationship. Finally, familiarization may also respond to a certain extent to the emotional needs of migrants themselves, separated from their loved ones.

d) *Support from the solidarity institutions.* Valuable survival resources and the shift to a regular status originate from the relationship with different institutions that offer solidarity: religious organizations, trade unions and associations. Health care, for example, is provided in cases of urgent need by public hospitals, but most of the usual services are provided through surgeries where doctors work as volunteers. Soup kitchens offer free meals to anyone in need, and most of these are immigrants in irregular status. Many associations and religious organizations offer language courses, which meet the needs of those who cannot have access to courses offered by the public system. Regularization paperwork is handled by services established by the trade unions, Caritas and other organizations.

e) *Access to some public services.* Undocumented immigrants are by definition the weakest 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 considered compliant 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, waiting to emerge into the sunlight. Today, however, in Italy (but not only), government policies are trying 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 public services. A daily battle sees confrontation between the institutions of control and the staff in educational and health services, who are generally inclined to "cheat honestly" the legislator, to allow undocumented immigrants to have access to services (Zincone, 1999).

f) *Lack of effectiveness of the repressive apparatus.* A paradoxical resource that allows the continual flow of migrants lies in 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 practical results. In 2008, out of an estimated 750,000 undocumented immigrants, there were fewer than 18,000 expulsions, i.e. less than 3%. Places available in the Identification and Expulsion Centres for the detention of immigrants waiting for deportation are around 1,800 in the whole country, and the actual rate of inmate expulsion in 2008 was 41%, lower than three years earlier. When it comes to women engaged in household chores and care, it is not only difficult and politically uncomfortable to control private households, but the unwritten rule is almost that of a generalized tolerance. One could say that they are not treated politically, nor perceived socially as undocumented migrants. The windows of opportunity

opened by amnesties or regularizations represent the counterpart to the limited effectiveness of deterrence: the strategy of irregular migrants is to evade the controls, waiting patiently for a favourable opportunity, and finally to take advantage of the right moment to regularize.

g) *Emotional ties and marriage alliances.* Another resource, accessed by some of the women who migrate alone, is the establishment of sentimental relationships with Italian men, which can lead to marriage. It is generally known that women who migrate alone have often left behind broken families, or they are widows or otherwise they are single parents (Banfi & Boccagni 2007). Many of them migrate just to attend to their children's needs, not having the support of a partner. In other cases, the departure is a socially legitimate way to end a relationship that is no longer acceptable. Even though the presence of underage children could be an obstacle for the creation 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 with one of the sons of the elderly person they are looking after. Usually these people are older than them and have previous marriages.

h) *Caring and frontiering* (Bryceson and Vuorela 2002). The survival of migrants in irregular status cannot be separated from their concern towards their loved ones left at home, especially 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, being able to maintain contact with them despite the distance. The support of the substitute care-givers, 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. Communication with care-givers and transmission of affection to their children are important aspects of daily life of migrant women. 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.

They are also customers of courier services that connect Italian cities to many destinations in Eastern Europe, through which they send money, gifts, letters etc. (Ambrosini 2008). But they also have to heal the pain of separation that extends over time, often beyond expectations. Telephone services, thanks to the spread of mobile phones and to increasingly lower costs, are an essential aid, but the use of new communication technologies is also gradually developing. The difficulty of survival in a precarious condition and with few rights is compensated by the expectation of being able to meet the needs of children at home, to support them in their studies and possibly to promote their arrival at a later stage.

Conclusions: The irregular condition as a career

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In this article, I have tried to highlight three aspects: first, the interaction between unauthorized migrants, the economic and social needs that they meet, and the other social actors they face in their settling processes, in the domestic sector; secondly, the resources and practices that allow undocumented workers to survive, often for years, waiting for the opportunity to legalise their status; the nature of the irregularity condition, which is dynamic and does not have a standard definition. Despite increasingly fierce declarations, the reality does not match the claims regarding control of the migration flows. Recognized or disguised forms of tolerance (Vasta 2008), only occasional implementation of measures such as deportation, regularization processes of different types and with different purposes, seem to be more the rule than the exception, in Italy as in other developed countries.

In short, the irregular immigrant, especially the working one, a long-term resident or incorporated in a context of family relationships, seems to be a transitional figure, waiting for legalization, rather than a rule-breaker destined to be punished and sent back to his own country. The waiting period tends to protract and sufferings increase, but the direction does not change. National boundaries, entering authorization procedures, residence permits, definitions of regular and irregular conditions, show their conventional origin and a flexible configuration.

In this process we can identify the key stages:

- Arrival and inclusion, supported by networks, very active in meeting demand for home-care services, which does not hesitate to turn to undocumented immigrants, despite the widespread prejudice against any immigration that is defined as undocumented or illegal.
- The phase of survival in the shadows, where what is central is the relationship with the Italian families their work for, with employers with whom they develop complex dynamics of emotional attachment and labour exploitation
- The emergence stage, during the periodical campaigns of regularization, thanks to the availability of families-employers and the support of solidarity organizations
- Once you have a residence visa, the eventual release from live-in jobs, to switch to jobs that allow you to have a private life and, where appropriate, to bring over the family.

Domestic care work seems at the same time to be the most unpleasant but also the most socially accepted and the most likely to lead to a regularized position. Strongly reminiscent of the pre-modern era, it comes to the aid of the functional overload of many families in post-industrial societies. Political recognition of this “invisible welfare” being built from the bottom up is still unforthcoming, however, as is public commitment to govern it according to the modern rules of equality, justice and dignity.

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