

## **Ageing, transnational families, and elderly care strategies: social interactions, welfare challenges and equitable well-being**

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### **Abstract**

The ageing process and the considerable longevity need constant care work, attentive to the possibilities and weaknesses of each subject. In Italy, the promotion of home-care, as a way of greater well-being for the elderly and his/her family, has generated new family models and migration processes. There are new educational challenges in transnational urban spaces and in multicultural contexts. This intertwining of families and generations outlines new social dynamics of inclusion and exclusion and requires the development of processes of awareness and support paths towards an “across the border” Welfare. Social policies, in close connection with economic and educational ones, must take in consideration the plurality and interdependence generated by global complexity and identify new viable ways to support the ageing <processes>. In our contribution, we will examine the connections between the elderly, families and migrant careworkers, analysing the ways of communication and interaction of transnational families.

**Keywords:** ageing; care system; transnational families; technology and communication; welfare and well-being.

### **Abstract**

I processi di invecchiamento e la crescente longevità delle persone anziane necessitano di un lavoro di cura costante, attento alle risorse e alle fragilità di ciascun soggetto. In Italia, la promozione delle cure domiciliari, come via di maggiore benessere per gli anziani e le loro famiglie, ha generato diversi modelli familiari interconnessi con i flussi migratori. Emergono così nuove sfide educative negli spazi urbani transnazionali e nei contesti multiculturali. Questo intreccio di famiglie e generazioni delinea ulteriori dinamiche sociali di inclusione ed esclusione e richiede lo sviluppo di percorsi di consapevolezza e di sostegno in una logica orientata verso un *Welfare* “oltre il confine”. Le politiche sociali, dialogando con quelle economiche ed educative, devono prendere in considerazione la pluralità e l’interdipendenza generata dalla complessità globale e identificare nuove vie percorribili per sostenere l’invecchiamento continuo. Nel nostro contributo, esamineremo

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mo le connessioni tra gli anziani, i nuclei familiari e le *careworkers* migranti, analizzando le modalità di comunicazione e di interazione delle famiglie transnazionali.

**Parole chiave:** invecchiamento; cura e assistenza; tecnologie e comunicazione; welfare e benessere.

### 1. *Cross family dynamics and care strategies*

*The global chain of care* (GCC) (Hochschild, 2000; Ehrenreich, Hochschild, 2002) is a concept strictly connected with globalization studies – in increasingly interdependent contexts from the economic and labor perspective –, migration studies – with migration flows related to improving the quality of life and family plans –, care studies – between the ageing process and promoting a culture of home care for the frail elderly – and gender studies – with a focus on migration, household management and care work for women.

This phenomenon involves many subjects and was coined by Arlie Hochschild in order to refer to «a series of personal links between people across the globe based on the paid or unpaid work of caring» (2000, p. 131).

In the Italian case of elderly home-care managed by migrant women, so-called 'badanti', we are witnessing the development of international strategies, bonds and networks of families. This complex situation concerns the intertwining of the different families that are part of the GCC, with particular reference to migrant women and their children. Thus generating global links between the families of care-providers and those of care-recipients.

The migration of women who arrive in Italy to provide home-care to the frail elderly, guarantees the cohesion of Italian families. At the same time, changing family ties, especially with their children, give rise to *transnational families* (Baldassar, Baldock & Wilding, 2006; Gardner & Grillo, 2002; Wilding, 2006). The GCC, in fact, involves husbands, children, parents, relatives, neighbours and friends in those complex relationship dynamics which undermine the balance of the places of origin where the families of carers working in Italy live (Vietti, 2010).

There are two different local dimensions, poorly represented in the global context, profoundly changed by the work of migrant care, and these definitely relevant changes are interconnected, specifically departure and arrival. We will focus more on the axis between Italy and Romania, given the large 'caregiving' migration flows that characterize these

two countries (Da Roit, Facchini, 2010; Vietti, 2010) which generates factors of inclusion, exclusion and inequality (Deluigi, 2013).

Through various surveys and researches conducted at European levels (see sources in the text), our reflection will try out the numerous variables generated by “migrant care work”, and their interdependencies on the quality of life of everyone involved. In this regards, just to better understand the multiple facets of the phenomenon, Parreñas described the influence of *care substitution* and *care arrangements* in transnational families, with particular attention to the gender distribution of care responsibilities (2005). This variable is important to understand how the migration countries can cope with the mothers’ absence.

The migration of care workers generates and feeds a care drain in their country with consequences on the family members left behind. As we mentioned,

many of these carers are women who leave their children and elders behind, trying to provide for them via a job in another country. The children and elders left behind are often left to the care of other family members (usually mothers, sisters and other women in the family circle) but it is not rare, especially when the family lives in an urban area, that another woman from a rural area is employed to care for the children or elders. This woman who is hired may also be a mother and have left her children behind in the care of someone else (COFACE, 2012, p. 7).

This is a typical GCC but, often, we are able to perceive the living conditions and the advantages acquired, and in the receiving country, more easily than the challenges and resources of the overall phenomenon.

The open and flexible structures of transnational families give rise to several questions regarding the projects of the individual and of the family members (especially for children). It is due to the difficulties encountered, the influence that these migrant flows have in the country of arrival and departure and the various communication strategies used to try to be cohesive (Ambrosini, 2005) so as to *continue to feel and to be a family*.

In the experiences of transnational families, we can observe different strategies to maintain solidarity and intergenerational ties (Merla, 2011), up to «media parenting» (COFACE, 2012, p. 13) where the technological connection between two countries is good. New technologies are more accessible and lower-cost and communication between family members is easier (for example, smartphones, tablets, fast connections,

all-inclusive or specific telephone subscriptions between two countries, etc.). In this way, mothers can have constant and daily visual-audio-text contact with each family member, especially with their children, with text and vocal messages, easy and free applications (WhatsApp, Skype, Viber, telegram, etc.), emails, and social networks.

This multifaceted model of communication «can increase privacy in the conversation and foster day-to-day intimacy and bonding» (*ibidem*) and allows to maintain family ties, strengthen cultural values and specific forms of expression (related to mother tongue), and provide affective support to the family members (Benítez, 2012). We need an analysis of the role and of the impact of the ICTs as mediators of every form of caring from a distance in transnational families and, at the same time, of the importance of physical presence-absence (Baldassar, 2016).

In fact, the ICTs, as a channel of care, help transnational families to maintain everyday routines and responsibilities in new complexity of long-distance interpersonal relationships (Ryan *et al.*, 2014). It will be interesting to improve understanding of how children provide assistance to their family members (here and elsewhere) in the use of new technologies, developing ways to share co-presence and care (in an intergenerational alliance and in a perspective of useful life-wide long learning).

If the focus is on the experience and practice of care, it is important to take into account the paradigm of the care circulation, which considers the entire relationship network around care flows. «A care circulation lens, with its focus on the practices and processes of the asymmetrically reciprocal exchanges of transnational caregiving, offers a productive way to trace and retrace the links and connections between members across distance and time, which constitute the workings of “global households”» (Merla, Baldassar, 2013, p. 9).

Alternative and compensatory strategies of «distance caring» (Baldassar *et al.*, 2007) mainly concern mothers' relations with their children and with the new caretakers (uncles, grandparents, brothers, etc.) who principally deal with the children left behind. «Care drain represents a dramatic reflection of inequities on a global scale. Its impact is on families, the community, and the social texture of both providing and receiving countries. The long-term adverse effects of care drain impact the global community, and the burden stretches from generation to generation» (Akpınar-Elci *et al.*, 2015, p. 6). Attempts to keep families cohesive do not entirely eliminate the risk of a «care shortage, a social network under stress, of widespread insecurity, partly because of the fact that often the migration of mothers takes place in familiar contexts already

self-tested by difficulties and various kinds of crisis» (Ambrosini, 2007, p. 10) associated with new familiar geometries and asymmetries. «Two dimensions appear crucial. The first concerns the emotional and existential depth that continues to play, despite the separation, the relationship mother-child [...] the second one concerns the weaving of transnational ties» (ivi, p. 21).

As we have seen, the migration choices are *strictly related to each other and to the elsewhere* and many researches show that the strongest motivation to move is that of guaranteeing a better future for the children (Boccagni, Ambrosini, 2012; Sgritta, 2009). That is how the carers, *global women*, embark on a journey and on an existential project with surplus emotional value (Ehrenreich, Hochschild, 2002), often dictated by having «no bearable choice» in their local dimension (Bauman, 1998).

One of the factors pushing migration is the close correlation between the children and money in order to achieve the children's goals. There is an intergenerational and solidarity investment to improve the living conditions of the family. At the same time, there is an ethical dilemma: *leave the present to ensure their children have a better future*. Will the mother's absence be compensated by an effective better quality of life?

We must consider that the loosening of family ties, and, in particular, transnational motherhood, does not necessarily represent an anomaly or a temporary way, nor is it likely to lead to the rupture of pre-existing relationships, but that it can be a prelude to a new family structure (Herrera-Lima, 2001).

The remoteness of time (ranging from months to years) of one of the key members of the family, no doubt, generates new equilibriums and a possible break or a long lasting bond. So, this is the reason why it is necessary to systemically consider the transnational dimension: from family ties to those related to everyday life (Boccagni, Ambrosini, 2012), in a close interconnection between space and lifetime of the families involved in the care processes.

These complex plots often remain hidden in the new relationships between the caregiver, the elderly person and her/his family. The systematic dimension of 'trans-' disappears in the face of the emergency and the needs of everyday life of the care recipient. In addition, the risk of isolation for care workers is high (Deluigi, 2014; Lazzarini, Santagati, 2008) due to the management modalities of home care. The life stories of carers become invisible and irrelevant and they become 'neutral subjects', workers who deal with care without any support for self-care, a fundamental element to do a good job with the frail elderly. The meeting

of loneliness and fragility (elderly caregivers) takes place in a work environment that is not always completely formalised, in which the burden of neglected personal experiences can accentuate the perception of a silent distance that generates discomfort and heaviness. The skills of care (Capello, Fenoglio, 2005) are often based on previous familiar experiences, where an automatic conversion to professionalism and capacity is required – the need to learn «on the job» (Sgritta, 2009).

When intersecting family expectations, the needs of the elderly and the ability of carers and gender perspectives, care is naturally attributed to women, and those who perform this profession are a type of «sub-proletarians of care» (ivi, p. 71). In the Italian context, they are still not recognised as (g)local agents of inclusion. As a result, family cohesion in Italy and the care drain in the country of provenance are underestimated and the impact of distance motherhood is overlooked. This “submerged condition” creates contradictory effects and substitution processes in an ineffective *homemade welfare system* and complex transnational family and economic budgets related to *migrant care*.

We are still far from the development and implementation of a Transnational Welfare that considers the interdependence between social systems involved in the migration process, the common problems and opportunities and the possibility of co-managing social processes related to migration. This approach would respond to crucial issues and have the potential for Welfare regimes on both sides of the migration process (Piperno, Tognetti Bordogna, 2012). We must rethink the policies and Welfare practices with greater openness and cooperation with the countries of origin, thus supporting effective processes of dialogue, exchange and inclusion on several levels.

## 2. *Distant spaces, constant ties*

In the previous section, we saw that in transnational parenting, new relationships-delegation develop for child care and that the elderly parents of carers (or other caretakers) try to maintain contact with the family also through new technologies (Deluigi, 2013; 2014). Virtual connections and real everyday life are interlinked, and family ties are reviewed: mothers, children, fathers, grandparents, etc., they lose the opportunity to be physically together in the same place and try to restore an ‘absent presence’ through sharing the experiences that each of them leads in his/her’s life.

The border along which migrants move is fragile because family ties are constantly put into crisis by economic, psychological, relational, emotional, and social aspects. Women emigrate with the goal of saving an ideal of family structure that begins to disappear when they leave the household (Balsamo, 2003; Vietti, 2010).

The inter-generational and familiar pact takes hybrid forms to support different processes of growth 'at a distance' and to promote a better quality of life for all persons considered fragile in the care system (from the children left behind, to the elderly care recipient). This happens provided the caregiver is willing to give up her personal ambitions and projects, in a maternal spirit of free donation and sacrifice.

The migration choice of mothers is, therefore, a necessary and contingent family strategy focused on the children. Women often live trapped in a contrasting polarity between distance and guilt, economic and existential fragility needs, remote care and ongoing support, delegation and fear, etc., concealing the emotional costs of the experience of transnational parenting.

We must also reflect on the fact that the absence of migrant women from their families is a reflection of the absence of Italian women from caring for their parents. This creates a circular spiral of the right to care that questions the gaps in Welfare system to which we are subjected, and which broadens the reflection at an international level.

Coming back to the maternal role the caregiver's thoughts are necessarily aimed primarily towards the children left behind, especially if those children are minors. The reorganisation generates extended families with unstable and diversified structures and we can deepen this field of life and research. Some bonds are consolidated; others are neglected or cut, depending on *who becomes the caretaker to replace the mother*, a role often taken on by the maternal grandmother (Ambrosini, 2007).

The complex structure of transnational care (we refer in particular to the case between Eastern Europe and Italy) generates closely interdependent full and empty spaces. Carers develop new professional and personal ties and there are consequences on all those directly and indirectly involved in the migration project and in the care processes.

Even knowing that every migration story has its peculiarities, for all those who are involved, we want to reflect on the various spaces in which we spend our lives and develop our ties and, below, in relation to the issues highlighted, we will consider some of them.

The *migrant space* creates distance with the homeland and with social and family ties; it comes to life when one decides to migrate, leav-

ing personal and interpersonal existential places in order to undertake new, unknown or not entirely known ways. The physical movement also urges a shift in thinking that, only if it becomes *migrant thinking* (Pinto Minerva, 2002), is able to restructure a precarious or stigmatised identity.

It is the space of the movement, of the disorientation and of the displacement that *gives way to the category of the possible, of the untried, of the new*. It is a place of hope, of necessity, of loneliness, of awareness, of need, of will, of transit: they are all elements that blend into the life story of individuals and their families.

The migrant space becomes a journey, a route, a path to cross and to trace. It is a space of planning, also devoted to others, and, sometimes, it is the only feasible alternative. It is a space that queries the ethics of *leave to return*, of absence to build the future, the distance that offers opportunities for success. It is a space of sacrifice and commitment of those *women who choose, decide, are invested in by the family* and who assume responsibility for the group. It is the space of desire for the self and/or for others.

The migrant space, is hence, at the same time, the space of loss and of opportunity and it is possible that women lose control of their migration project because of the expansion of the needs of the children. Mobility can become the condemnation to a vicious circle in which the demands of the relatives are renewed or multiply. On the axis between Italy and Romania, being able to move without borders and visas “pushes” delegation of the return decision to an unknown date, even where this is felt to be a project to be realized (CESPI, 2007). Carers can live their situation in a kind of ‘apnea’, due to the migration project, which means they do not think of themselves, but of others.

The *space of everyday life* is the place of *real life*, in which we face issues, problems, opportunities and challenges. During our daily lives, we undergo all those more or less significant experiences, which affect the construction of our identity. These events primarily concern the relationships we build, as well as the loneliness that we cross, and *make us more or less ‘human’ and fragile*.

The presence or the lack of affection of loved ones, the possibility, or not, of building new friendships, good professional support networks and connections, affect our well-being and our ability to complete personal (and professional) projects. In the case of carers, fatigue, loneliness, and commitment to others – in formal and informal ways – can become excessive and an extra burden.



In everyday life small and large events happen and contribute to forming our person. We are, we become and we search for points of reference towards an open dialogue, to confront ourselves, and to narrate our experience. In homecare we can find different levels of relation and different systematic issues of social research:

Do migrant care workers and the (often ethnically rather homogeneous) care recipients interact harmoniously and understand each other's expectations and ways of communicating? Is the multicultural workplace detrimental to smooth working relationships and therefore, ultimately, also the quality of care, or are workers from diverse backgrounds and cultures able to work together successfully? How care workers conceptualize and manage their relationships with clients, managers and colleagues has important ramifications for their motivation, well-being and the quality of care they provide (Timonen, Doyle, 2010, p. 2).

The processes of care, ageing and migration are interconnected and this affects the quality of life for everyone involved. In the present, the promise of the past and the premise of the future takes place. Sometimes it is an unexpected promise and a precarious premise, which also embraces the families' dimension. True-life stories are held in the different social spaces of inclusion or exclusion, looking for a balance with the migrant identity of each one. Daily space also takes place in the smiles, in the tears, in the desire to see others or to be alone; it is a space in which time becomes life, *face* (Curci, 2002; Lévinas, 1972; En. trans. 2003) *and history in a collective frenzy or in an isolated slowness of everyday*.

*The virtual space* connects the migrants and their families at home. It is a space of mediation and a communication channel. As we saw before, carers using the new-social technology can easily create a bridge with their family, in a sort of "daily care". They are like an essential cornerstone of the immigrant family experience with consequences in the structure and shape of the family and its capacity of resilience (Bacigalupe, Cámara, 2012).

We must therefore move towards an ecosystem perspective because the virtual space becomes a dialogue place, as a substitute / surrogate / integrator in a context in which *the everyday life is not shared, the care is not granted and the absence is necessary*. In the virtual dimension people *try to rebuild a lost proximity, seek alternative ways of being present, of blazing new identities and family roles*.

In virtuality it is possible to meet different everyday experiences and identities and the personal, professional, social events of the subjects have the opportunity of being told and represented. The illusion or the

perception of *being present, as if we were there, to feel next to each other*, becomes an essential element and, in the case of migration, we argue that these items also became an existential feature of the virtual experience.

Virtual reality can support continuity in relationships and «the possibility of communicating more often and more personally can influence the migratory project and change the initial plan: mothers who thought of moving only for a few years to earn some money to provide for primary needs of the family left behind may decide to stay longer since they are able to keep good contact with their children and parenting them» (COFACE, 2012, p. 13).

### 3. *Transnational care, face to face and virtual interdependence*

Virtuality is certainly more fragmented than a face-to-face relationship; in any case, subjects live a 'partial presence' that helps to be kept "updated" and to do new projects, not to be satisfied simply by past memories and imagination. Through images and voices, in fact, one can feel closer to others.

We can describe the transnational social space as a «complex situation of contemporary polymedia» (Madianou, Miller, 2012, p. 55) in which *every day there are different kinds of connection in the transnational families' lives. Family members create different ways to maintain long-distance relationships to care for each other in a mediated relationship and the impact of new media is really strong. The polymedia concept describes a complex and heterogeneous combining of a variety of technologies to communicate in a better way. This different 'contamination' mixed with the actual access to a wide range of mobile and internet-based media, the level of digital media literacy and a shift in cost from individual to infrastructure, towards free use (ivi, p. 126) can condition the nature of family relationships.*

These new tools that connect and hybridise real and virtual life, although they do not allow living a real affective experience (in the flesh), allow expanding spaces and times of the self-narrative and sharing experiences in progress. In this way, it is possible to mutually create, between mothers and children, some reference points for daily life.

Thanks to 'low cost' virtuality (Skype, Facebook, WhatsApp, Instant messages – audios, videos, photos, etc.), carers can keep the contact with their families constant, trying to reinforce the emotional and relational aspects of that relationship. At the same time, it is really important to de-

velop “hybrid approaches” not just thinking of the mother-child dyad, towards *re-designing social spaces – with different caretakers: i.e. family members, educators, teachers...* –, in order to increase the renewal of trust networks and to improve a parent’s awareness of the child’s needs (Brown Grinter, 2014).

Transnational mothers are actively engaged in ICT communication, to maintain an «intimacy at a distance» (Sgritta, 2009, p. 108); the use of webcams and free applications is an increasingly common practice and becomes an integrative strategy to strengthen family ties (in addition to letters, gifts, remittances, etc.). More intense and constant communication can create a «connected relationship» (Wilding, 2006) in which individuals are able to share content, emotions, and feelings.

Using new technologies, transnational families can build *new relational dynamics and new experiences of sharing spaces and times as a family* (Sorrells, Sekimoto, 2015). If ICTs are available in both poles of the family – we should not overlook the digital divide, depending on the accessibility of resources – one can keep in touch in a constant way, but we need to improve our understanding of the transformation of the role of care in an eco-systemic way.

The interdependence between transnational families and the care of older adults (especially with the migrant flow and mobility from East to West Europe), requires a greater reflection on how to cooperate *to promote a new co-shared sense of well-being of both the local and global population*. The presence of migrant care workers in Italian society is a substitution strategy of welfare and we have to find some new ways of co-existence and active citizenship in order to build a more inclusive society (no longer strictly referring to the national border).

Global society generates new migrant spaces and virtual boundaries of self-caring and family ties and, from a pedagogical point of view, it is necessary to promote *new perspectives of care based on reciprocity, exchange, and interconnections*.

In this way, the intercultural approach has to develop a complex framework to *support professional and personal ties in order to promote and share co-responsibility between families and communities*. We need an effective transnational Welfare based on a bilateral axis of reflection and action, with socio-political-economic alliances, in which the target is not the individual but the family with its networking.

The political value of pedagogy will become theoretical/operational frameworks, really integrated in specific local contexts, if this approach can consolidating flexible and dynamic networks, supporting commu-

nity development and community planning, promoting active citizenship and intergenerational solidarity (Deluigi *et al.*, 2015). The challenge is to pursue an eco-systemic perspective of Welfare based on relationship and on subsidiarity (Donati, 2012; Fondazione Zancan, 2014). It means not underestimating *the question of care drain and the circle of care – with the interdependence of the subject involved; the impoverishment of the local context of a mass-migration – with the social injustice and inequalities; the consequences of a care structure based on a family's private resources – with phenomena of non-sustainability and social exclusion.*

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