



Article

“Look at Me, but Better”: The Experience of Young NEET Migrant Women between Vulnerability and Stifled Ambitions

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Abstract: The experience and the condition of the vulnerability of young immigrant women with NEET status are not acknowledged in both research and social policy. Within the extreme variety gathered under the term NEET, this present article aims at exploring the experience of a group of young non-EU migrant women aged between 18 and 31 living in Italy, who at the time of their participation in this study, were not engaged in education, employment, or training. Nineteen semi-structured interviews have been collected involving young women who migrated from Bangladesh, Egypt, India, Morocco, Pakistan, and Tunisia, in most cases through family reunification. Thematic analysis carried out on interview transcripts highlights the complexity and richness of the stories and experiences narrated by participants, composing a heterogeneous group marked by different levels of vulnerability and resilience capabilities, language skills, and involvement in the goal of finding a job. The perception of vulnerability that emerges from the women interviewed refers mainly to the relational dimension of life, which appears to be characterized by loneliness, a sense of isolation, and feelings of extraneousness (not belonging) with respect to an external context. Implications for policies aimed at this specific group of foreign women are discussed.

Keywords: NEETs; migration; migrant youth; vulnerability; women

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1. Introduction

Young adults in NEET status (neither employed nor participating in further education or training)—including those with a non-EU migratory background—represent a major concern in European policy debate and interdisciplinary research (Eurofound 2016; Eurostat 2021a).

In the last decades, research has broadly documented the condition of vulnerability associated with being or becoming NEET. Frequently reported detrimental effects range from personal and societal economic costs to additional costs derived from service provision and welfare to long-lasting physical and psychological effects (i.e., feelings of alienation, isolation, depression, negative outlook on the future, reduced life expectancy, and obesity) (Felaco and Parola 2022; Lazzarini et al. 2020; Höld et al. 2018; Jongbloed and Giret 2022; Mascherini et al. 2012; Pesquera et al. 2022b; Pintaldi et al. 2017; Simões et al. 2021).

However, the apparent univocity with which the term ‘NEET’ is used in research is now being problematized by many researchers who, underlining the heterogeneity of this population and the complexity of the causes of the phenomenon, have emphasized the need to engage with greater conceptual clarity and operationalization of this concept. More specifically, the term NEET is firstly often criticized for its grouping of a highly heterogeneous set of young people under one single term and flattening their specificities (Jongbloed and Giret 2022; Maguire 2018; Mascherini 2019). Secondly, it appears to label people negatively, as it defines young people through what they are not, possibly reinforcing stigmas and stereotypes (Yates and Payne 2006). Thirdly, the term NEET is criticized for

perpetuating and reinforcing an individualizing approach, as well as framing the issue in terms of personal failure (Lőrinc et al. 2020). Therefore, the term NEET—and the sheer conceptual inclusivity of said term—bears considerable ambiguity.

The first main distinction is drawn between (short-term and long-term) unemployed and inactive young people. Subsequently, among several sub-categories of inactive individuals (unavailable because of family responsibilities such as childcare, discouraged workers, youth with disabilities or illness), the category of young women with care responsibilities who are not looking for a job remains deeply understudied (Avagianou et al. 2022b; Jongbloed and Giret 2022; Mascherini 2019; Russell 2016). This is even more true for young women with a migrant background, despite their high NEET rate (Pesquera et al. 2022a; Zanfrini 2021).

Given this picture, this study focuses on young women NEETs with a migration background living in Italy. Specifically, it investigates the experience of a sample of women selected within the national groups with the higher inactivity rate. To our knowledge, this is the only existing study dedicated to this group; therefore, it aims to contribute to the existing literature by emphasizing the characteristics and experiences of one specific subgroup of young people not in education, employment, or training, as well as by exploring how migration history and background impact choices and lives of young women.

1.1. NEET Rates and Correlated Variables/Predictors: The Fragility of Immigrant Families in Italy

In 2021, in most EU countries, the highest proportions of young NEETs (young people neither in employment nor in education and training, aged between 15 and 34 years) were recorded among third-country nationals (Eurostat 2021a). The average NEET rate for young people in the EU was 13.2% among nationals against 17.5% among young citizens of other EU Member States and 27.4% of young citizens of non-EU states. Italy recorded the highest NEET rate for both native citizens and foreign ones, whether EU citizens (33.1%) or non-EU citizens (36.5%).

According to the available literature (Avagianou et al. 2022a; Caroleo et al. 2020; Mascherini et al. 2012; Pastore and Zimmermann 2019; Ryan et al. 2019; Täht and Reiska 2016; Zanfrini 2022), the condition of NEET derives from a complex correlation of institutional, structural, and individual variables. More specifically, the following individual variables affect the probability of joining the NEET group: female gender, citizenship, migration background, family status, level of education, geographical location, and personal health conditions.

As far as gender is concerned, there is a notable difference between men and women. In 2021, one-fifth of young women (20–34 years old) in the EU were NEETs, while the corresponding percentage among young men was 13.1%. In Italy, too, women have consistently constituted the largest group among NEETs, particularly in the 25–34 age group. Furthermore, the incidence of NEETs increases in the 25–29 age group and continues to grow further in the 30–34 range for women, which records the highest values at the age of 30 (ISTAT 2020).

A similar percentage of young women, both Italians and foreigners, excluded from training and economic opportunities would result primarily from greater difficulty in balancing economic and family life affecting women. Also, comparing inactive NEETs and NEETs looking for work, with a clear prevalence of the former, women are more discouraged (or however detached) from the working world than men. Moreover, as we have already noticed, young people with a migrant background are 70% more likely to become NEETs than natives (Mascherini et al. 2012). As a consequence of the foregoing, the component at greatest risk of exclusion is represented by young foreign women.

Furthermore, aspects such as family revenue, parents' educational level, and occupational status have a ripple effect on the condition of youth, thus perpetuating a vicious circle. Firstly, the social class they belong to affects the risk of becoming NEET and the duration of the period of unemployment. In addition to this, however, prolonged absence from work affects the (lack of) development of human capital, the discouragement effect, and the self-

perception of one's condition (Di Padova and Nerli Ballati 2018). Highly dependent on class inequalities are access to and permanence in training systems which, in turn, are inversely related to the risk of falling into the condition of NEET (Mascherini et al. 2012, pp. 56–57). In the context of a national framework that is already discouraging as far as both tertiary schooling rates (OECD 2022) and early dropout rates from educational systems (Eurostat 2021a) are concerned, young foreigners appear to be further disadvantaged, as regards both the first and second indicator (Eurostat 2021a). Some studies have highlighted how not only young people with the lowest educational qualifications are more exposed to the risk of becoming NEETs, but also how, once they have joined this category, they stay there longer (Borgna and Struffolino 2019). All these phenomena account for the particularly vulnerable condition suffered by young people with a migrant background (Pesquera et al. 2022a). Reflecting a model of work inclusion that directs immigrants mainly towards manual and low-skilled jobs, in Italy, the foreign population suffers from a condition of structural disadvantage. This phenomenon is confirmed by data reported by the National Institute of Statistics (ISTAT 2022) on the share of “working poors”—people who, although formally employed, do not receive an adequate income to live in dignity—and on the incidence of poor immigrant families. In 2021, 32.2% of foreign families—against 9.2% of Italian families and 30.5% of “mixed” ones—were at risk of poverty; 30.6% of foreign families—against 5.7% of Italian ones—suffered serious material deprivation; what is more, even when the reference person was employed, as many as 24.7% of foreign families (against 4.2% of Italian-only families) fell below the poverty line, a percentage which reached 31.1% if one observed the immigrant households where the reference person was classified as a manual worker.

Moreover, this model of inclusion ends up favoring the attraction of a “poor” immigration also from the point of view of education levels. A phenomenon already visible in the past, the ethno-stratification of Italian society has consolidated over the years—parallel to the transition from an immigration of workers to an immigration made up of families—to significantly accentuate during the pandemic which, as it is known, had an effect of amplification of social inequalities at both international and national level (Zanfrini 2022).

The fragility of immigrant families impacts new generations—born in Italy or arrived in Italy through family reunification—who experience a systematic disadvantage within the school system—attested by all the indicators—and, above all, a dramatic overrepresentation among early school leavers (32.1% of young foreigners against 11% of Italians). In the transition to the active age, despite a higher share of young foreigners opting for more immediate professional training courses, young people with a migrant background continue to be heavily penalized. As a matter of fact, in a country that already has one of the highest youth unemployment rates in Europe (second only to Greece), the percentage of non-EU individuals aged 15–29 in unemployment exceeds that of Italians by almost two percentage points (25% against 23.1%), while for young people from other European countries, the unemployment rate stands at 21.9% (Eurostat 2021b).

And, above all—as we have already observed—an extraordinarily high share of NEETs make up the unemployment rate for both men and women. In a country which already has the highest share of young NEETs, young foreigners register the unenviable record of more than one in three young people who neither study nor work. Such circumstances explain the social and sociological relevance of the issue of foreign NEETs.

1.2. Female Foreign NEETs: The Specificity of a Women's Phenomenon

Focusing on foreign NEETs, their 2021 incidence reached 36.5% for non-EU and 33.1% for EU-foreigner residents against 23% of Italian-born (15–34 years) (Eurostat 2021a). Furthermore, whilst the percentages of foreign men NEETs (21.2% for EU and 22.8% for non-EU) are slightly higher than those of their Italian peers (20.2%), the same cannot be said for the women NEET component, which shows a rate of 43% for EU foreign women and 50.1% for non-EU compared to of 25.9% among Italian-born (Eurostat 2021a). Therefore, in

the context of the general disadvantages that young foreigners face towards natives in the transition to the active age, the female gender exhibits a particular weakness.

Nationality is one of the main factors explaining the different presence of foreign women within the NEET category, as well as the way in which they revisit gender roles within the couple (Accordini et al. 2018; Giuliani et al. 2017). The literature has highlighted how the behaviors marked by different models of organization of family life are linked to geographic origin, which appears to assign a different position to men and women on the basis of gender roles (Di Brisco and Farina 2018). In some national groups, the incidence of the female NEET component is confirmed by the high rates of unemployment and inactivity. Extraordinarily high unemployment rates are recorded (2021) among Egyptian (57.5%), Bangladeshi (53.6%), Tunisian (44.6%), and Moroccan (39.9%) women (Direzione Generale dell'Immigrazione e delle Politiche di Integrazione 2022). Even more shocking is the inactivity rate, as we will see later.

Indeed, Italy's migration transition was heralded at the end of the 1970s by the arrival of young single women destined to be employed as domestic workers. A large number of home helpers and caregivers has attracted the attention of many researchers, who have identified the feminization of migrations and the labor market as a distinctive trait of the Italian migration story (Zanfrini 2022). Even today, women represent a prominent share of foreigners residing in the country, and the activity rate of immigrant women was higher than that—particularly low—of Italian women until the eve of the pandemic: in 2019, the activity rate of foreign women was equal to 59.3%, against 56.1% of Italian women.

However, the process of stabilization of the immigrant population and the increase in entries for family reasons (which for several years have been the prevalent share of new entries) has led to a persistent increase in the rate of women's inactivity. Moreover, the share of inactive women is quite variable between different national groups. On the eve of the pandemic—which resulted in a general rise in women's inactivity rates—the activity rate ranged from 74.8% for Filipino women to 10.6% for women coming from Pakistan. These latter—together with young women from Egypt, Bangladesh, India, Morocco, and Tunisia—were chosen as the target of this study since, at the time of its design, they were the groups characterized by the highest rate of female inactivity. According to the most recent data (referred to 2021), even 88.3% of women coming from Pakistan are inactive, as well as 83.9% of Bangladeshi women, 82.9% of female Egyptians, 76.5% of women from India, 71.7% from Morocco, and 70.5% from Tunisia (Direzione Generale dell'Immigrazione e delle Politiche di Integrazione 2022).

Focusing now on the situation recorded at the start of our study, as far as the condition of young NEETs between 15 and 29 years of age is concerned, compared to the 43.5% recorded for the total of non-EU NEET women, these national communities showed clearly higher values: 75.8% (13% for males) for Bangladesh, 73.6% (11.4% for males) for Egypt, 61.2% (28% for males) for Pakistan, 61% for India (18.6% for males), 60.1% for Morocco (36.5% for males), and 56.1% (37.5% for males) for Tunisia (Ministero del Lavoro e delle Politiche Sociali 2021). At the same time, these same communities, except for the Bangladeshi one, were supposed to have a higher level of education among employed women compared to their male peers. Within the collectives of Morocco, Tunisia, India, and Egypt, employed women were, in fact, more educated than men, especially in terms of university degrees, although these values are lower than those recorded for the overall non-EU female population (16.3%) (Ministero del Lavoro e delle Politiche Sociali 2021). Regarding the Pakistani collective, women had lower levels of education than men in primary and secondary education but were better placed in terms of tertiary education, recording a value (25%) even higher than that of the non-EU female population (Ministero del Lavoro e delle Politiche Sociali 2021). Finally, the socio-demographic characteristics of foreign NEETs are significantly different from those of Italian-born. According to the last available data (unfortunately referred to some years ago: 2016), among Italian NEETs, the percentage of those who live with their family of origin prevails—that is, who in the statistics are classified as “children”—and among the foreign NEETs, a significant percent-

age had already gotten married and—especially among young women—had also already had one or more children. In 70.5% of cases, foreign NEET women (in the 15–29 group) lived within the home, covering the role of mother or partner in a couple, evidence that, in Italian women, was found only in 22.7% and in 9.1% of cases among foreign men (ISTAT 2017). This suggests that the problems of work/life balance are even more relevant than for young Italians.

As a matter of fact, the Italian accumulation regime continues to be based on a strong gender asymmetry in the division of productive and reproductive labor and on a “familistic” welfare model (Esping Andersen 1990; Ferrera 1998) that charges families (or, more precisely, women within families) the greater burden in housework and care. Despite the progress that has occurred over time, and despite being, on average, better educated than men, Italian women continue to record low levels of participation in the labor market. The rate of female activity already drops sharply after the birth of the first child, both due to the scarce supply of support services and due to women’s wages, which are on average lower than those of men (so as to make it economically convenient for women to leave work for taking care of children or other family members in need of assistance, particularly in the case of women occupied in low-qualified jobs).

It is, therefore, easy to assume that the difficulties of matching family and work are even more complex for immigrant women, who lack a strategic resource for many Italian families (grandparents who take care of their grandchildren while the parents work) and who, when are occupied, have very low incomes. Copiously employed as maids, babysitters, and assistants for the elderly, female economic migrants have been representing, since the 1980s, a fundamental tool for the “care balance” of Italian families. However, the transformation of an immigration of workers into an immigration of families it is inevitably bringing out the same care needs of foreign families. It is in this scenario that the question of female migrant NEETs must be analyzed.

1.3. The Current Study

This study draws upon qualitative data collected as part of the MIMY project (Empowerment through liquid Integration of Migrant Youth in vulnerable condition, <https://mimy-project.eu/>, accessed on 1 January 2021) that aimed to explore in nine European countries integration processes of young third-country migrants in vulnerable conditions.

The introductory picture outlined above largely justifies the choice of dedicating the Italian study’s focus on life experiences of young non-EU migrant women NEETs aged 18–29 years.

This choice is also supported by some specific attempts that have taken place only recently to investigate different types of NEET statuses of young people. In this regard, it is worth noting that an increasing amount of attention is devoted to the well-being and life experience of NEET women who are inactive and yet engaged in childcare tasks. Qualitative and quantitative studies have documented and confirmed the uniqueness of the NEET status of mothers (Jongbloed and Giret 2022; Maguire 2018; Russell 2016). A recent comparative study (Jongbloed and Giret 2022) analyzed the consequences of NEET status on psychosocial well-being among several subgroups of unemployed and inactive NEETs: their results showed that young women engaged in unpaid care work exhibit higher levels of psychosocial well-being in comparison to those who are unemployed and other categories of inactive NEETs. Furthermore, there is growing evidence of the importance of considering how gendered norms governing the transition to adulthood can help explain the short- and long-term effects of NEET status on the psychosocial well-being of youth and young women (Jongbloed and Giret 2022). However, despite this recent attention to the topic, the experience and the condition of vulnerability faced by young immigrant women who are outside employment, education, or training but engaged in unpaid caring roles is not acknowledged in both research and social policy; therefore, it remains a relevant area of research in Europe and specifically in Italy.

In addition to contributing to filling the knowledge gap concerning this specific component of the immigrant population, our study aims to explore the condition of this group, with particular regard to some aspects chosen as relevant for the analysis of the concept of vulnerability and the strategies of resilience, in line with the MIMY project general aim. This is carried out also taking into account that, in some European countries, it was exactly the condition of women—or, better said, the condition of marginalization on the labor market of many immigrant women—that profoundly influenced the debate—and even the legislative solutions—on the management of entrances and integration models. The so-called “integrationist turn” (Joppke 2007) has a lot to do with a gender issue and, to some extent, with the inactivity of migrant women, called into question to explain the economic vulnerability of migrant families, the condition of social isolation of migrant women, and their consequences on the socialization of children born into immigrant families.

2. Participants and Method

The study was based on the analysis of in-depth interviews with a selected group of NEET female immigrants.

Participants were recruited and invited to participate in this study based on the following criteria:

- being TCN (third-country national) immigrant women with a chronological age ranged from 18 to 29 years;
- being currently not in employment, education, or training (NEET condition);
- belonging to one of the national groups, which, in Italy, have a women inactivity rate almost equal to or greater than 70% (see Section 1.2);
- staying in Italy for not less than two years.

The enormous difficulties encountered in finding the subjects to be interviewed led the researchers to flexibly apply these criteria, sampling in two cases women just over 30 and who arrived in Italy just under two years ago.

A “snowballing” technique was used to gain access and identify the participants via language classes, ethnic organizations, local charities, schools, as well as word-of-mouth. Despite the previous experiences of the interviewers, the wide network of contacts put in place and the possibility of resorting to the help of multilingual mediators/translators, the process of recruiting the young women to be interviewed proved complex and difficult. For example, numerous women that had been contacted, even within “protected” environments—e.g., at the venue of language courses reserved for women—declined the interview, justifying themselves with the lack of time or—sometimes—with the fact that their husbands would not have liked the interview. Therefore, the final sample can be considered the result of a “self-selection” process, which probably ended up excluding exactly some of the most isolated and vulnerable women.

Overall, 19 individual semi-structured interviews were conducted by three expert interviewers between September 2021 and April 2022 with young women in NEET status aged 18–31 across two North Italian localities (Milano and Reggio Emilia). Participants came from Morocco (N = 6), Pakistan (N = 5), India (N = 4), Egypt (N = 2), Bangladesh (N = 1), and Tunisia (N = 1). Most of them (N = 17) arrived in Italy through the process of family reunification. More specifically, 15 of them arrived in Italy after having married (in many cases through a so-called “arranged marriage”) a co-national already residing in the country, and 2 arrived when they were small children or teenagers joining their father who had lived in Italy for many years. Only two of our participants arrived alone as an adult: one of them has obtained a status of humanitarian protection, and the second one is an “economic migrant” who entered with a temporary visa with the aim of finding a job. At the time of the interview, most of them were living with husbands, in-laws, and children (N = 12); alone with small children (N = 1) or in a protected community with children (N = 2); or with parents and siblings (N = 3). All the interviewees were, at the moment of the interview, regularly residing in Italy (despite being regularly sojourning was not a selection criterion). Out of the 19 women interviewed, as many as 5 attended university

in their country of origin, although only 3 completed it by obtaining a Bachelor's degree. In other cases, their school career was interrupted following the marriage and subsequent migration to Italy.

The socio-demographic characteristics of participants are presented in Table 1.

Table 1. Participants' socio-demographic characteristics (N = 19).

Characteristics	
Country of origin	
Morocco	N = 6
Pakistan	N = 5
India	N = 4
Egypt	N = 2
Bangladesh	N = 1
Tunisia	N = 1
Age (in years)	
Range	18–31
Mean (SD)	25.9 (3.90)
Years in Italy	
Range	1–22
Mean (SD)	7.78 (7.25)
Living with	
husband	N = 2
husband and children	N = 8
husband, children, and in-laws	N = 2
children	N = 1
children and family of origin	N = 1
children in protected community	N = 2
parents and siblings	N = 3
Having child/children	
Yes	N = 14
No	N = 5
Marital status	
Unmarried	N = 3
Married	N = 14
Separated/divorced	N = 2

Interviews were structured using a topic guide with the aim of encouraging open conversations on different areas of participants' pre- and post-migration life experiences. The topic guide was designed according to the criteria shared with the other research teams of the MIMY project and adapted to the specific target thanks to the strong experience of the researchers involved. The interview focused on opportunities and/or constraints encountered along their integration path in several life domains (perceived challenges, family, school, work, social relationships, plans, and aspirations).

Interviews were conducted in Italian or English on the basis of the language preferences expressed by the respondents, frequently with the support of an Arabic-speaking cultural mediator. In several cases, conducting the interview was very hard, due to the difficulties in understanding the questions, mitigated but not completely resolved by the presence of a linguistic and cultural mediator. Even some women who had lived in Italy for five or more years turned out to lack adequate language skills.

All interview transcripts were systematically coded using thematic analysis aimed to integrate aspects of Question-based coding, Theory-driven coding, and Emerging coding (Braun and Clarke 2006). Example interview quotes are used to illustrate themes and subthemes. Participants are identified through interview number code, location (the acronym MI refers to the interviews conducted in Milan; the acronym RE to those conducted in the province of Reggio Emilia), country of origin, and age.

3. Results

In what follows, results are presented separately for each of the six main topics covered by the interview outline. These are, respectively: difficulties, resources, socialization/education, work, future perspectives, and gender issues. Each theme with its subthemes is described below using direct quotations from the interviews. The reported quotations were translated into English, trying to respect the original verbal expressions related to the discursive context in which they were elicited.

3.1. Difficulties

For most of the women interviewed, the perception of vulnerability mainly refers to an impoverished and deprived relational life post-migration, and, specifically, it is linked to the feeling of isolation, the separation from the family of origin, and the inability to effectively interact with the local population whose idiom is not known. Sometimes, it is also linked to the perception of the negative prejudices that can be read in the judging gazes of those you meet. The experience of social isolation and inadequacy of language skills mutually reinforce each other in a vicious loop. As effectively summarized by this interviewee, who arrived very young in Italy to follow the man she was in love with, life in the destination country turned out to be much less rosy than she had imagined:

So, my family left me free to choose, obviously, since the person I love and who I married lives in Italy, the most logical choice was to come here, also because I could not have a family living in another country. But I must say that I had imagined Italy completely different ... my image of Italy was different because when I came, I saw everything else. There is less space, fewer social relationships, I hardly ever go out, less fun, my husband works, works, works, works all the time, and I can't go on: even on Saturdays and Sundays he works from morning to evening and I don't I knew it was like this here [MI, no. 4, Young woman from Egypt, 26 years old].

It is precisely the low level of linguistic competence—also characterizing some women who have lived in Italy for a long time—that constitutes the main factor of vulnerability at an individual level: evidence emerged from the first impact with the country of immigration.

Mom! It was just that I felt stuck. I thought what I'm doing here, I don't understand anything, I can't speak [RE, no.1, young woman from India, 27 years old].

I felt vulnerable because of the language, not knowing it well I feel vulnerable, fragile [MI, no. 4, young woman from Egypt, 26 years old].

The feeling of vulnerability derives from the perception of a gap between one's (performative or even just argumentative) potential and what one can express (or not express). This frustrating gap ends with casting any type of activation:

I like to do my studies; study books and I have to do the math. I like cooking and many other things. But when you see here my heart closes because everything in Italy is difficult for me [RE, no. 4, young woman from Pakistan, 31 years old].

It is precisely through the experiential and relational dimension that a given hindrance—such as the lack of language skills—real but surmountable, is transformed into the perception of vulnerability, certainly aggravated by the feeling of social isolation and the weight of responsibilities towards the family members:

The moment my daughter was born ... I am alone, there is nothing ... My husband at work, there is no person to help me do things ... (...). Yes, even to talk to the pediatrician, the doctor, I feel this very difficult [MI, no. 1, young woman from Morocco, 23 years old].

Delving deeper into this topic, behind the suffering which derives from the difficulty of understanding and even more of being understood, there is the feeling of undergoing, precisely because of one's linguistic "diversity" (evocative of a cultural distance), a devaluation of one's own identity, with consequences that are projected, mostly on the children.

For several women, perceptions of being vulnerable stem from continuous comparisons between pre- and post-migration relational life, and they seem to be reinforced when critical events occur, such as migration, marriage-induced departure, pregnancy and children birth, death of relatives, and the pandemic. For many participants, the memory of the moment of departure causes a feeling of vulnerability. This is especially true because the moment of departure has almost always interrupted a family life described as serene and mutually supportive, as well as the rich sociality typical of extended families. Many interviewees seem to suggest that migration was not a cultivated personal plan or strategy but rather the “natural” consequence of the choice of marrying a man living abroad:

Before meeting my husband, I never think that I want to go to another country (. . .). I came here with my husband (. . .). I never forget this period, because also I used to with my family, my sister, my brother, and everything changed (. . .) and this somewhat difficult period when my son was born, I cry because I needed my mom [RE, no. 3, young woman from Tunisia, 30 years old].

Commuting between the two countries, the one of origin and Italy, is a not uncommon phenomenon within migrant families. The concept of “double absence”, so brilliantly described by Sayad (1999), is embodied in the lived experience of some interviewees:

When I am here, I have always missed my mom and dad. When I am in Pakistan my husband has always been missing when he is not there [RE, no. 4, young woman from Pakistan, 31 years old].

Together with the perpetual impression of having to “choose” between the world of affection and sociality and that of economic and educational opportunities are expressed:

I was really close to my cousins but now we are far away, and I really miss them. That is a bad thing because when you are far from your loved ones you feel dry and anyone else is just . . . I really like Italy, but I want my cousins to come here but that’s the problem with me because I miss them a lot and my grandmother really miss me. And they just want me to come back in Pakistan, but I want to live here because there are more opportunities in Europe as a working country and also studies are well [RE, no. 10, young woman from Pakistan, 18 years old].

The death of a relative as a critical event leaves an open wound, too. We have to consider that migratory paths, and particularly family-reunion paths, are often influenced by the health conditions of the relatives (such as grandparents) who support left-behind spouses and take care of left-behind children.

. . . and then after nine months [the grandfather] is . . . dead. He is gone. For me it was a very difficult time. Maybe until today I can’t . . . anymore . . . to . . . to leave that point. So far, he’s in my heart, maybe every day I think about him (. . .). Sometimes I tell myself that he has gone away because I think every day and maybe I cry, that I have stayed at that point anyway . . . [RE, no. 12, young woman from India, 21 years old].

Finally, we have to consider that, for a few of our interviewees, the first months of life in Italy coincided with the outbreak of the pandemic and the consequent lockdown, which exacerbated the feeling of isolation and nostalgia.

Seen from the perspective of our Western mentality, it is surprising how not a few of our interviewees—even among the most educated—arrived in Italy thanks to an arranged marriage, finding themselves living next to a husband they did not know in a country that also they did not know.

Then, if we start with the migration, it was not a good experience. Because in India we do this, my father accompanied me towards marriage, I did not know, I did not recognize my husband. After our marriage, after three months I came to Italy. I didn’t like it because I didn’t know anyone. Above all I did not know the language, I always felt alone and isolated [RE, no. 5, young woman from India, 28 years old].

Family—the one of origin and the one of election—represents, as we will see in the next section, the main factor of resilience, albeit often at the price of a strong compression of spaces for personal freedom and opportunities for professional fulfillment. Conversely, when the family is not there or is broken, it constitutes the main cause of vulnerability, that is, the factor that accentuates the weight of all the other difficulties. Among our participants, the most emblematic cases are those of two young mothers forced to live with their children in a host community for women victims of intimate partner violence. Their stories retrace those of many other single women, often aware of having repeated the same mistakes but just as often pushed to act in a certain way by the lack of alternatives.

But my mistake was too serious because let's say that when someone makes a mistake, he learns from his mistake, instead I have not learned anything . . . That is why I am now in this community point. It was all like this and in the end, I found out that I am pregnant. Then it was six beautiful months as if I were in heaven, I said maybe he really changed, he wants to start another life that has seen that I'm pregnant, there is a baby who is coming and I thought maybe he really wants to change then I went back to him, because I have been to Morocco twice to make the separation but I have not succeeded. I came back and said: "Okay, I'll try this time", but there was nothing to change, he's still the same man (. . .). That's why I went to ask the social worker for help, and they helped me, first I even filed a complaint from my ex-husband . . . [MI, no. 6, young woman from Morocco, 28 years old].

3.2. Resources

Several types of resources and strengths pertaining to individual, family, and, partially, community levels are described by our participants.

At the individual level, the main resilience factors are identified in some personal character traits (for example, the readiness to rationally cope with an emergency situation or the propensity to always get involved), but also in human capital resources and previous life experiences. Once they arrived in Italy, being faced the need to manage difficulties that, in many cases, had been underestimated; one possible strategy is going “step by step” and learning from the everyday experience: *“I worked hard, I tried to start doing things little by little”* [RE, no. 1, young woman from India, 27 years old]. This idea that resilience is something that can be learned even—or perhaps above all—in the most difficult situations also resurfaces in the words of this young woman, probably the one among our interviewees who finds herself living in one of the most difficult situations.

Everything is difficult but I learned because before I couldn't tell people “No, I just don't do this”, also tell my partner that I don't do this, I was always afraid he would do it to me something. Now I have learned to say it. What will happen? [RE, no. 7, young woman from Pakistan, 27 years old].

Another recurring factor could be defined as the imperative to remain “faithful” to one's choices, however painful they may have been on an individual and family level:

The first year I was in difficulty, but it is normal because if you change a house it is also difficult to sleep in another house and sharing a country or a different culture is also much more difficult. All things are different. Just the language. It's a bit difficult. But this is my choice. Coming to Italy even if I don't understand and speak well [RE, no. 1, young woman from India, 27 years old].

Precisely the reference to the family dimension allows us to appreciate the importance of this aspect. The family, in fact, constitutes a resilience factor not only for the relationships of exchange and support (above all emotional) that remain vital despite the physical distance but also because it is an institution involved in migratory choices, even when it comes to apparently exclusively individual choices. We could say that the behaviors enacted in migration are embedded in the texture of family and inter-family relationships (that is, the relationships that bind the families of origin of the two spouses) and of the normative expectations connected to relations between genders and generations. These

expectations, for example, require the “success” of migration projects (just think of the tendency to keep family members in the dark about the difficult aspects of life in the receiving country) and compliance with gender roles dictated by bread-winner regimes. Usually described as constraints to individual freedom and mortgages on migrants’ paths, these expectations take on the traits, in the interviewees’ accounts, of resilience factors.

I chose to come here, but I didn’t want to give up and I didn’t want to fail, also to give a message to my family, to tell them that I will succeed and to stay calm, it was still a choice that I made, and I decided to go ahead also because I was responsible for the choice While for the economic aspect I never asked for anything because I never made him [her father] understand that we are living in a difficult moment, because my husband preferred this way, to say that everything is fine when I talk to them, and that we will do it and not tell my family to send us anything [MI, no. 3, young woman from Morocco, 27 years old].

In more general terms, together with the left-behind family, the new family also constitutes a factor of resilience precisely by reason of the duties it entails.

For mothers, the main factor of resilience is the presence of their children and the need to take care of them:

The first [important element that pushed me to go on] is when I discovered I was expecting a boy or a girl, and this gave me incredible strength [MI, no. 3, young woman from Morocco, 27 years old].

I always say that I must learn forward because there are two children who live here in Italy. When I look at my children, I get a lot of strength. It’s okay for them because you live here for me, so I’ll move on. This maybe give me the strength to go on [RE, no. 3, young woman from Tunisia, 30 years old].

It is, above all, the biographies of the interviewees most affected by difficulties and suffering that indicate the potential for the redemption of the experience of motherhood; it is the case of those who suffer from a situation of loneliness, economic difficulty, and a sense of failure as well as those who have passed through the fire circle of depression.

Unfortunately, I had too difficult situations, but I didn’t give up on strength. I was sick many times, I cried, I did everything. But I tell you that I saw my children, it became my automatic force . . . I live for my children, if I’m not there how can I do it? [RE, no. 7, young woman from Pakistan, 27 years old].

I am a bit of a self-injurious person but when I see the little girl, I can’t even hurt myself, because if I get hurt, the consequences will affect her and I don’t want that. This is why I said at the beginning that I wanted to be a super mom, because I would like to set a good example for my daughter [MI, no. 2, young woman from Bangladesh, 20 years old].

In a more general sense, the joy experienced after having given birth to a child proves able to dissolve the migratory trauma and also to “reactivate” the capacity to manage the everyday challenges and to strive to understand a language hitherto considered inaccessible.

Now I am a mother, and my children need me and this changes life, this one thing that I just think [RE, no. 4, young woman from Pakistan, 31 years old].

Now [after my daughter was born] . . . my strength, I am strong to live in a country where I do not understand its language, its culture (. . .). I am strong to understand, I am strong to live with des gens . . . [MI, no.1, young woman from Morocco, 23 years old].

Considering resources at the family level, for most of our interviewees, with very few exceptions, the family of origin is always present, despite the physical distance, thanks to the possibility of communicating daily or even just to the awareness of being able to do so at any time of need:

My mom, my sister, always. Always help me against stress, always calls after slowly [I feel] better [RE, no. 6, young woman from India, 28 years old].

Marriage and new family experiences are significantly evoked as something that “changed life”. In more general terms, especially for those who arrived in Italy through the family reunification procedure, the attitudes of both the husband and the new in-laws are very relevant.

I have a very cooperative husband, very helpful, who has always remained close to me, and when I look at him, I think he deserves all the sacrifices made and for the good of the family I will go on [MI, no. 3, young woman from Morocco, 27 years old].

Then my husband and my in-laws always helped me, always motivated me to study, sent me to school [to acquire the compulsory school license], then to another school for this qualification certificate. Always told to go out of the house, otherwise at home I can't learn something new [RE, no. 5, young woman from India, 28 years old].

Contrary to a widespread prejudice that portrays societies of origin as characterized by patriarchal cultures, male figures are described—with rare exceptions—with very positive tones. This is true for husbands—sometimes married without even knowing each other—and especially for fathers. In addition to their authority, fathers are reported to have a supportive and empathic posture, which makes them a constant point of reference, despite the physical distance.

He always said I'm a distant phone when I think you can't live here alone. "Call me I will come with you, I will come to you in 8/10 h. Don't worry" ..this is a phrase of my dad when he said to me at the airport and I always remember this [RE, no. 4, young woman from Pakistan, 31 years old].

The family is also the agency through which some fundamental values are kept and transmitted, which, in the migratory context, prove to be relevant identity anchors.

One thing that has a lot of value in my life is respecting seniors [RE, no. 12, young woman from India, 21 years old].

We do our religion, yes because I am Muslim and so is the conseil that I carry, my dad told me: "Be kind to all the people, with Italians, Moroccans, so live well" [MI, no. 1, young woman from Morocco, 23 years old].

Furthermore, the teachings passed on by family members are explicitly described as factors that strengthen the ability to juggle daily challenges and be supportive to others. Here is how a translator summarizes what the interviewee said:

The teachings I received from the Church, such as helping others, being respectful, are all teachings that I always carry forward, even here in Italy. Everything related to the teachings of the Church and of my parents [MI, no. 4, young woman from Egypt, 26 years old].

In the literature on migration, the “suitcase” is a recurring metaphor to identify what are the most important things that the migrant brings with them, anchors for the past and promises for the future. This excerpt from an interview is particularly significant because it puts the objects of faith and prayer together with formal credentials with a look not so much at personal fulfillment as at the need to “give back” to one’s parents the fruits of their sacrifices.

The first time I came, I couldn't bring everything. But I brought the holy book of the Koran, being a Muslim, which gives me strength, faith, and courage and then the carpet to pray. The second thing is my academic qualifications, the training courses I have done, my master and when I open the suitcase, I don't want to waste my time, I want to translate them. I am just waiting to learn Italian well to restart my studies. I want to make my family happy, after all they have done for me [MI, no. 3, young woman from Morocco, 27 years old].

Family is also the concept that reinforces the conviction that migrating was the right choice.

This is not possible that she here and he there is because my dad always said so and a family (. . .) as if to say a house, a husband and a wife always remained close together. It is for this reason that when I had my wedding my dad immediately said that you do all the documents and go [RE, no. 4, young woman from Pakistan, 31 years old].

In this light, it is also possible to try to understand how even a phenomenon such as arranged marriage can translate into a factor of resilience. Seen from the perspective of those who have escaped this practice and “survived” the disapproval of their parents, arranged marriage is, of course, a practice producing vulnerability and subordination:

In Pakistan most of girls do not stand by themselves because their parents even kill them for doing this thing in Pakistan. And in Pakistan lots of parents are killing their daughters because of their respecting society [RE, no. 9, young woman from Pakistan, 20 years old].

However, when it is accepted by the spouses and lived as an expression of conformity to a reassuring cultural model, it can generate a strong—and strengthening—sense of identity.

They [family members in India] are happy because I am happy. Even at the beginning I was not happy here, I had never told them that I am not happy (. . .). Maybe because it is the culture, which after marriage we must . . . we must change, we cannot complain, because it is so . . . because . . . perhaps because it is the culture [RE, no. 5, young woman from India, 28 years old].

Finally, moving on to consider resources at community level, the most recurring quote concerns the teachers of the Italian courses, real points of reference, not only on the instrumental level but on both the emotional and the motivational ones. In the accounts of the interviewees, the meeting with one of these figures marks a turning point in her own experience: it is a sort of “bridge” that finally allows access to a world that had hitherto remained largely unknown.

I really like Italian teachers because they are so supportive and they teach us very well even if I don't know Italian [RE, no. 10, young woman from Pakistan, 18 years old].

I changed my ideas a bit about . . . as the fact that all foreigners say about Italian, so she is an Italian, very kind but the visit always helps me how. Go take a course this side there was one thing, you have to learn, you have to do, she gives me energy, a person who has a lot of energy [RE, no. 3, young woman from Tunisia, 30 years old].

N. helped me a lot, because I still let her follow me, she is a very good person, I feel her like a mother [MI, no. 2, young woman from Bangladesh, 20 years old].

However, especially for those who have found themselves dealing with particularly difficult situations, a fundamental supporting factor is the institutional system of social services. This is the case, in particular, of single mothers who, due to the violent or, in any case, inappropriate behavior of their partner, have had to go to anti-violence centers and/or use the reception communities for mothers and children. The “Italian State”—to quote the expression used by one of the interviewees—embodies a quality of the welfare system that is incomparable to the reality of the countries of origin [“ . . . really thank you because without the Italian State I would not be here, I would be on the street maybe without my son, who take my son from me, or I would already be in Morocco”, MI, no. 6, young woman from Morocco, 28 years]. We are, therefore, very far from the polemical and disparaging tones that characterize much research on the relationship between immigrants and the welfare system, generally aimed at underlining the latter’s shortcomings. And yet the quality of interpersonal relationships is truly discriminating; if not actually, as suggested by this interview, the emergence of a dimension of gratuitousness and empathy able to overcome the instrumental and conditional logics that often mark the approach of immigrants to the

welfare system on the one hand and that of European welfare towards vulnerable people on the other.

There were some of the anti-violence center of N., there was a lady named R., I called her one night, one evening I called her and I said: “Look, I can no longer bear this life, what can I do?” And she gave me an appointment and then I went to them. She told me so many things, she . . . I can say she gave me a hand to get up. The first hand I took was from this person. He talked to me and told me: I’m here . . . In the end the people who helped me were all Italians. I can’t find the words . . . As I told you they did things that I think not even my family can do, because they kept me all all, from head to toe . . . they never left me, I don’t miss anything, even for my son, and it is something that I really do not find the right word to speak of the Italian State. (. . .) all the things I have now, I didn’t do anything to get to this point, and so they gave me things without doing anything . . . [MI, no. 6, young woman from Morocco, 28 years old].

3.3. Socialization and Education

For those who attended the education system in their sending country, the experience of the school and even more of the university is described by all as extremely positive. Parents are described as very supportive, even if they were poorly educated [*“my parents who are illiterate, have given the opportunity to study each in their own sector”*, MI, no. 3] and aware of how investments in education are an instrument of social mobility [*“they don’t want me to do any job, they don’t want me to work as a housekeeper or dishwasher, rather they tell me not to”*, MI, no. 3, young woman from Morocco, 27 years old].

However, at least in one case, the statement of an interviewee raises the suspicion that the possibility of studying was not intended by the father as a real investment in the professional future of his daughter [*“He didn’t care if I was studying or not, but my father told me that if I wanted to study. I wanted to do it close to home and well”* RE, no. 1]. This hypothesis is indirectly confirmed by another interviewee. From her story, it seems that the value given to education varies instrumentally due to the parents’ marital strategies for their daughters.

I was good in education, I’m a position holder and I have always positioned second in my class, second or first. So, my education is first priority for me and my parents told me that education is most important thing in life, so keep study and whenever you want keep study. So, when I completed my university the proposal came, but that proposal seemed good to my parents, therefore they married me, they decided to engage me to a guy. But after [when the arranged marriage was canceled] they just told me: “Keep going, keep going in education and do whatever, find a job”. But after my marriage [a decision not shared by their parents] they stopped talking to me [RE, no. 9, young woman from Pakistan, 20 years old].

Finally, this interviewee, in explaining the sudden about-face of her father, testifies how the possibility of studying is still perceived today, within patriarchal cultures, as a challenge to a social—and migratory—model based on women’s subordination.

And my father, since I arrived in Italy, has left me free to learn Italian, study, do everything. And at a certain point, speaking of relatives— “Your daughter goes there, your daughter spins, your daughter here . . . ”—my father changed his mind saying: “No, you are just eighth grade, period, and that’s that” [RE, no. 7, young woman from Pakistan, 27 years old].

Almost all the interviewees declare with some pride that they did very well in school as if to contrast their academic successes with the current condition of disengagement from career goals—for some of the interviewees—or with the difficulties encountered in exploiting training investments, even in the case of technical and scientific degrees. As we will deepen in the next section, only after arriving in Italy did our interviewees realize how difficult it was to profit from qualifications acquired at home; the same must also be said for the possibility of continuing and completing one’s training.

In 2017 I arrived here in Italy, I also wanted to finish school and do more studies but they told me that it is not possible. I went to the police station to ask but they told me that no, you can't, I have to study the language first, then I have to translate my diplomas, then I can give something but at the beginning I have to study. I gave up but I went to look for work [MI, no. 6, young woman from Morocco, 28 years].

This situation of substantial stalemate sometimes ends up generating a form of disengagement, a total loss of ability to make projects and carry them out.

Yes, I don't know why I become lazy like . . . When I was a child, I wasn't lazy but I don't know . . . sometimes you feel lazy, you don't want to do anything. I just want that in myself, laziness and no . . . like when you don't want to study, like you want to study but you don't study . . . you just use your Phone because you are tired and that's the biggest problem: I spend time a lot but time is precious . . . [RE, no. 10, young woman from Pakistan, 18 years old].

Aware that their school investments are often inadequate for immediate access to the Italian labor market, several interviewees dream of starting to study in Italy again (despite this implying a downward mobility with respect to the educational levels already acquired). However, it is a dream that, with very few exceptions, is cultivated with little “conviction” and, in any case, always subordinated to family duties.

I tried to take courses to learn Italian to improve my language. I took the compulsory school exam. I did six months. Because I have a degree in economics in India and then I attended a course to become a teacher. After two years of university, I became a primary school teacher in India (. . .). I liked studying, now I would like to go to high school here. But I don't have time because school hours for adults are in the evening, and I can't because I have a family. Who do I leave my son with in the evening? It's a big problem [RE, no.1, young woman from India, 27 years old].

However, despite the apparent “uselessness” of their training investments, from the point of view of profitability in the labor market, the importance of education remains undisputed. In this regard, the words of the only “economic migrant” among our participants, who arrived in Italy alone and with a precise professional goal, are significant:

School is, as we can say, the basis of the house: without the base we can do nothing because everything falls and so it is for us too, if you have not studied. For me, school is too important a thing, school helps you to learn many things, in school we spend most of our time. If you do a school that is good, your personality will be good too, like the things you have studied [MI, no. 6, young woman from Morocco, 28 years old].

3.4. Work

As we pointed out in the description of the migratory paths of our participants, marriage, since it involved the “decision” to migrate to Italy, led to a sudden change in professional projects. And even though none of our interviewees said they regretted this choice, it would be improper to underestimate the costs it entailed. The testimony of an interviewee, particularly, allows us to grasp the distance between training investments and professional ambitions often projected into the most innovative sectors (IT, environmental sustainability, etc.) on the one hand, and, on the other hand, life choices in line with tradition, in which “the woman follows her husband”.

I studied to work in the sector related to the environment, because I studied anthology, geography . . . then I ended up working in a nursery. Then right after that I started getting to know my current husband. I only met him through telephone calls, before seeing him in person I fought a lot between two choices, I was ambitious, I wanted to be a geography teacher, to continue to do other studies, training courses. Therefore, in my head I had many plans for the future, to make my career. Then when my husband told me that we would then go to Italy, I was undecided whether to stay in Morocco and make a career or whether to get married and go to Italy. It was a struggle between reason

and heart. In the end the heart won, I am married, and I came here [MI, no. 3, young woman from Morocco, 27 years old].

Once they landed in Italy, even the women who were more projected toward the labor market had to deal with a very different structure of opportunities from what they had (perhaps a little naively) imagined. As emerges from the story of the same interviewee, women's "inactivity", often hastily branded as compliance with the traditional gender-based regimes of the division of labor, has rather to do with the gap between the resources that one is able to put in the field and the extremely complex context of the receiving society.

Before, however, I had talked to my husband saying that even here in Italy I would have preferred to finish my studies, and not be a housewife because I don't see myself keeping only the children and cooking and all the rest. He agreed, but when I arrived, I was shocked because I arrived at a difficult time, with the pandemic and I realized that it was not that easy and therefore it was very difficult for me [MI, no. 3, young woman from Morocco, 27 years old].

Beyond the exceptional nature of the pandemic phase, it seems to be able to grasp—even among the most culturally equipped interviewees—a substantial lack of a project. Symptomatic, in this sense, is the fact that some declared to have realized only once they set foot in Italy that their qualification here had no legal value (one interviewee even lists this "discovery" as one of the most significant events, along with marriage, of her life); or, even to what extent an at least basic level of knowledge of Italian is an almost indispensable requirement for finding a job.

There was an accounting degree and there was another one in the same two years of training, a course as you say Microsoft office specialist that I did and I took. There were two certificates, one that I can work within Morocco and one abroad and I took the one for abroad and I could use it to work in any country and I chose to come here (. . .) to do a translation things and then maybe find a job. But it was too difficult because, for me who only speak English and French, I can't do anything. I can't do in these two languages, so they told me I have to change everything. My first idea was to come here, study for a few months and then start working, but it wasn't like that [MI, no. 6, young woman from Morocco, 28 years old].

In the context of our sample, contacts with the Italian labor market are very rare. It is known that, in Italy, a significant percentage of formally "inactive" subjects actually work in the underground economy without a regular contract. This situation seems to concern only one interviewee, who works at her husband's company. Another interviewee dreams of starting a transport agency together with her husband, thus making good use of her Master's degree in Logistics acquired in Morocco. Three single mothers interviewed are strongly motivated to find a job in order to be able to guarantee economic independence and support their children. Despite the strong commitment with respect to the goal of finding a job, these interviewees find themselves compressed between their personal ambitions (which lead them to reject the classic immigrant jobs, such as that of a cleaning lady), economic hardships (which prevent them from investing in their own professional training), and the constraints deriving from the need to take care of small children: the result is a situation of impasse, which could lead to a discouraging effect and consequent disengagement. In general terms, future work projects look to the opportunities connected with the training courses usually offered to migrant women, including in the field of cultural mediation, which is one of the few non-manual workspaces for immigrant women in Italy. Only one interviewee declares that she has no work project (also because her husband does not want her to work).

In all other cases, the situation appears to be stalled since the maternal function has ended up becoming almost totalizing, both from the point of view of managing daily times and from the point of view of emotional investments.

The daily life of most interviewees is strongly marked by the needs of small children and domestic tasks, which end up "filling" all the time and, in many cases, favoring a total

identification with the role of wife and mother and the classic regime of male breadwinner. We can speak of a process of “re-traditionalization” of gender roles also for those women who, before getting married and arriving in Italy, had an active role in the labor market and cultivated ambitious professional projects.

She says she doesn't think about working now (. . .), she says that her husband already works and already has a nice salary, she keeps the family well and, for the moment, the only thing that interests her is to look good at her children, to help them to grow well and that's it [MI, no. 7, young woman from Egypt, 31 years old, summary by the translator].

The temporal coincidence between the “right” age to have a child and the crucial phase for the development and success of a personal career is a problem for many women in Italy faced in many cases with the postponement of motherhood. But for our interviewees, giving birth to one or more children immediately after marriage is a kind of normative imperative. Adding to the difficulties of arriving in a foreign country, the challenges of work and family balance end up expanding the time needed to enter the labor market to the point of prefiguring the risk of perpetual exclusion.

I left my country when I am so close to finding a great job. And now I am starting from the beginning . . . From this age up to 35 we want to work, after that, that desire to work reduces (. . .). So, as long as I am young . . . very young . . . I want to start working . . . working safe, safe work. If I can't find a secure job in the next three, four, five years, I'm afraid I may never get to work. So . . . because after a while we think that nothing is happening, and we stay at home, like my mother, like my mother-in-law and . . . depending on her husbands for everything [RE, no. 5, young woman from India, 28 years old].

Consequently, even for those who arrived in Italy with the intention of finding a job and putting their educational capital to good use, parenting commitments end up postponing the concrete realization of these purposes for an indefinite time.

Good will and determination can help me find a job. What disadvantages me is having small children [MI, no. 4, young woman from Egypt, 26 years old].

In a specular way, we understand how complex it can be for single mothers to find a job that is reconcilable with maternal duties; and which allows, at the same time, to reach a dignified standard of living. In these situations—for foreign women as well as for many Italian women—the support of the family of origin is the discriminating variable. On the other hand, when the family is not there or is unable to offer support, the risk is to be trapped, together with one's children, in a spiral of increasing vulnerability. The testimonies of some interviewees, temporary guests of shelters for women and children, communicate all the anguish that the situation could further worsen, together with the inability of the operators of the employment center to support them in the search for a sustainable solution.

I registered [at the employment center] but they told me: “You take courses and then you find a job”. Because I said: “Can you find me a secretarial job?, so at least I have to answer the phone and I have to do things while sitting”. But they told me: “No, you have to take courses, because you can't find”. The only job is cleaning, but I can't do cleaning because the products give me an allergy and I can't do it, do you understand? They didn't even tell me: “Don't worry, let's try to help you”, saying we help you, do something like this, or they could tell me take courses online if you can't leave the children, take courses, they didn't show me any roads . . . I feel bad there and say: “Damn, what do I do?” Because I feel bad after, and I cry like a crazy, that with the children where do I leave them? I can't pay a babysitter . . . [RE, no. 7, young woman from Pakistan, 27 years old].

As suggested by this same interviewee [“our men learned to be a welder in Pakistan and for that they find (work). We didn't find anything, it's not our fault, we came as children and we

have to learn everything in Italy”, RE, no. 7], Pakistani women pay the consequences of a male migratory model, which over time has produced migratory knowledge and social capital useful for supporting men in their search for work, but equally ineffective in promoting employment inclusion of women. For the latter, going beyond the established gender models is very risky and can easily lead to failure, bringing with it not only a professional failure but also an existential failure. There is a lack of women role models to inspire themselves to build their own emancipation and identify a sustainable balance between professional goals and family’s duties.

Turning to the other factors which hinder entrance into the labor market, according to what has emerged from the interviews, the first factor identified is the lack of language skills. More in detail, this criticality is also mirrored in difficulty in making good use of educational titles acquired in a different linguistic context.

First that I had not studied computer science in Italy, so I have the basics of computer science, but I had learned in English. Second, I don’t know Italian well (. . .). Third point that . . . first job is difficult. If you are changing jobs, it is easy for me, because you have the experience. I am without experience. So finding your first job is difficult [RE, no. 5, young woman from India, 28 years old].

I do put le graduates, diploma in Morocco, but everything with the French language, this is a problem [RE, no. 11, young woman from Morocco, 28 years old].

We have already observed how the need to achieve an adequate level of linguistic competence had been underestimated by most of our interviewees, who only once arrived in Italy have realized its importance of integrating both in society and the labor market. Many, as we have seen, continue to have a very poor command of the language even after years of arriving in Italy. On the other hand, among those who, over time, have learned to understand and express themselves in Italian, the tendency is to overestimate their abilities, especially in relation to the possibility of accessing qualified jobs. This statement issued in somewhat broken Italian is emblematic: *“They give more cleaning jobs, stuff like that, but I who studied here and I know Italian well don’t feel like cleaning the house”* [RE, no. 7].

In this regard, there is a crucial point that deserves to be considered. As this excerpt would suggest, the inactivity of immigrant women may have to do with the refusal to take on unskilled roles, far from the expectations cultivated during the years spent at school and university. As it also happens for many young Italians, female migrants’ unemployment is often “voluntary”, whereas education, from being a resource to accessing the labor market, can turn into a constraint because it legitimately raises the level of expectations. In such circumstances, the possibility of identifying with the role of housewife, wife, and mother offers a socially acceptable solution and allows women to refuse those “immigrant jobs” (the Asian factory of which the interviewee speaks, probably alluding to the small manufacturing enterprises run by Asian immigrants in which many compatriots work) that mark the fate of most migrants in Italy:

So, I want to work in Italy, but you do the language better because I really can’t do any work here, so . . . and I don’t want to work as an Asian factory or in a restaurant, I want to work in some professional business or . . . [RE, no. 9, young woman from Pakistan, 20 years].

Consequently, there is a largely unexploited human capital, which would require compensatory training interventions in order to be put to good use.

“What did you study?” Accounting. So I thought it’s a bit easy but no. City of new things even in a different language, I learned with French [RE, no. 3, young woman from Tunisia, 30 years old].

The lack of usability—not to mention the uselessness—of the qualifications obtained in a different linguistic context is a belief common to all the interviewees. To the point that some of them hypothesize, in the future, moving to an English-speaking country. A possibility that, however, must be measured against the needs and preferences of the

husband and children, so much so that it appears very far from being realized. On the other hand, regarding the few interviewees who show real investment in job search—or who have matured some work experience in Italy—the picture that emerges from the interviews largely reproduces the characteristics of the Italian integration model. Among them is a marked tendency towards overqualification. Such tendency towards overqualification is balanced and nuanced by proactive, conscious efforts towards employment (albeit at times occasional/sporadic or not corresponding to one's education), and requalification in other fields which warrant more possibilities in the host country. A case in point is represented by an interviewee striving to become a website developer, showing appreciation for the empowerment opportunities that a context such as the Italian one can offer: *“All this is impossible in India because there is no internet, there is no other person who helps”* [RE, no. 5, young woman from India, 28 years old].

3.5. Future Perspectives

Consistent with what has been stressed several times about the crucial function attributed to the knowledge of Italian idiom, it is precisely the achievement of an adequate level of linguistic competence that represents the first goal that most of our interviewees set for themselves. When asked how they imagine themselves in ten years, almost all of them (including those who have lived in Italy for several years) combine the acquisition of a good ability to speak fluently with their role as mothers.

I hope that I have learned the language better, that I have been a good mother to my children and that my family does not want for anything [MI, no. 4, young woman from Egypt, 26 years old].

The prospects for the future are also consistently projected on children. Women with very different economic and family conditions share this same priority. And although more than one hypothesizes a possible return to her country of origin in the very distant future, they all seem to think that their children will have to grow up here, taking advantage of the educational and welfare system and the better opportunities offered by a country such as Italy.

I did everything for him, nothing interests me anymore, my life is gone, I have nothing left, but when I see the dark I always see I. on one side, because all the things I'm doing now are all for him. He is my life. I no longer have anyone, nothing, only him. He is now my ultimate goal, to see him happy, with a roof, who goes to school, who has friends, who leads a normal life with his mom, even with his dad, but his main life will be with his mom, that I'm preparing it now. It's all for me, really . . . [MI, no. 6, young woman from Morocco, 28 years old].

Crucially, many interviewees have an optimistic outlook to their future in Italy. They described it with recurring elements: economic tranquility, a job (for some of them), and, above all, the children's good academic results. Some also suggest that this expectation has already been at least partially realized within a framework of priorities in which work and realization from a professional point of view are not even mentioned.

She said that since she arrived in Italy she was very happy, and until now she is still very happy because she has the life she expected from her husband, because her children also live a quiet life, they are happy here in Italy and they are learning good Italian, they go to school [MI, no. 7, summary by the translator].

The reasons for concern relate rather to the sphere of identity, the fear of acculturation that causes the loss of roots and the negative influence of Italian prejudices.

(. . .) our religion tells me that I cannot do it, I am afraid that my children when they grow up will be so fragile, thus achieved to follow, totally follow the Italians and forget it [RE, no. 3, young woman from Tunisia, 30 years old].

I'm just scared for my son. But I don't know how to explain that for us, my husband and I, who arrived here after more than twenty years of life, we are foreigners. But my son

was born here and he goes to school here and he has to be like other Italians [RE, no. 1, young woman from Morocco, 23 years old].

Finally, in the horizon of these young (often very young) mothers, there is the expectation that their children can attain full membership in Italian society, both from a formal and a substantial point of view; that is, in terms of work and life opportunities but also, in the perception of being accepted as full members of this society, in its turn based on the “quality” in interpersonal relationships. It is to realize this expectation that they put all their resilience into play. What could be interpreted as “generational sacrifice”—if we take into account the interviewees’ young ages and compare them with their Italian peers, entirely involved in their own romantic relationships and the construction of their professional future—emerges instead as the “natural”, consequential implication of the role of mother adopted so early (again with respect to local standards). Therefore, it is not surprising how some hypothesize to one day return to their country of origin. However, it is worth noting how this hypothesis is projected beyond time in a future scenario in which children are well settled.

3.6. Gender Issues

Most of our interviewees stated that they had not suffered from any discrimination from their parents because of their gender. However, in describing their society of origin, several participants have referred to the persistence of elements typical of a patriarchal culture aimed at exercising strict control over women’s behaviors and refusing them access to certain opportunities.

In Pakistan girls usually don’t drive cars but my father is different, so he usually gives me permission to drive, but sometimes it is not safe for me to drive but not for me, for other girls that do not have the permission to study or go to university [RE, no. 10, young woman from Pakistan, 18 years old].

Almost all respondents described their families of origin as being inclined to offer the same opportunities (including the possibility of studying) to both sons and daughters.

All equal. We all had the same opportunity and support. I have my brother a doctor, an engineer, a sister here who did a private faculty in English, but because they still studied more and their vote allowed them to do this faculty and not because of the parents of course [MI, no. 4, young woman from Egypt, 26 years old].

Nonetheless, interviewees’ descriptions reveal very different gender cultures from those of contemporary European societies. In particular, the persistence of the gender cultures of the countries of origin emerges in the asymmetrical pattern that regulates gender relations in the families of many interviewees.

If I need anything I ask my husband or father-in-law. They buy me . . . it’s not like they won’t buy me what I need, they always buy me. In a nutshell, men think of the economic status of the family, women do not (. . .). It’s not that they don’t allow me. I do not need. If I want something I can tell the others too and they buy me. There is no need to use the card. But it’s not like they steal my money [RE, no. 5, young woman from India, 28 years old].

And, in one case, in the explicit admission of how, even within the framework of peaceful family life, it is the husband who places a sort of veto on the possibility for his wife to work for the market.

She says her husband will never let her work because she says he is capable of supporting the family by himself and he doesn’t need to make her work and he doesn’t even let her go out and do things. The only thing is her husband, he has no other things [MI, no. 7, young woman from Egypt, 31 years old, summary by the translator].

Finally, we have already discussed the phenomenon of arranged marriages and how the latter can even have an empowerment function for the young women involved, strength-

ening their identity (through compliance with socially shared role models) and becoming a factor of resilience. Further food for thought is offered by the case of the interviewee who, evading the expectation of an arranged marriage, found herself forced to break off relations with her parents. What is striking from her story is how what she defines as a love marriage—contracted despite the opposition of the parents—was achieved in ways similar to those typical of arranged marriages, leading a very young girl to live in a foreign country with a husband physically met only at the airport, once arrived in Italy. This story serves to remind us how porous the boundaries are between arranged marriage and marriage freely chosen by spouses in those countries where this practice is still widespread. In even more drastic ways—considering the contextual break with the family of origin—this has led to a condition of total dependence on the husband from both an economic and an emotional point of view.

I married him by call, by online call. I was with my family, my husband and my family know each other and they engaged us telling that “my son is abroad, he is in Europe and he can’t come home, so we just decided to engage them by call online”. So I said “yes”. Then there was a lot of misunderstanding between the families, so my parents decided not to marry that guy, to not to marry me to that guy. Then I just . . . in three months, I guess, I kept talking to him and my engagement is over. So then I told my parents that “I’m in love with him”, they decided “you don’t ever met him by face so why say that you love him?” (. . .). I guess that he is a true guy and a good guy. So, I just talking to him and keep talking to him and my parents said “do whatever you want” and then I married my husband, my husband family married me to my husband by videocall [RE, no. 9, young woman from Pakistan, 20 years old].

Although life in Italy for this very young spouse turned out to be less happy than she had imagined, we can still speak of a successful marriage relationship with an affectionate and supportive husband. Unfortunately, things went differently for another interviewee, who arrived in Italy independently but ended up marrying a compatriot just met through Facebook, later finding herself stuck in a violent relationship, which compromised all her professional goals and caused her to live with her child in a community for women who are victims of violence. Two different examples but which demonstrate how the risk of vulnerability for women originating from the countries we have chosen to include in our sample has, above all, to do with the quality of the marital relationship; and, in some ways, how risky it is to try to break free from traditional marriage models, such as arranged marriage. Marriage models are certainly binding on the one hand—especially if we consider the possibility of professional inclusion and fulfillment—but, on the other hand, are protective and capable of generating, as we have seen, unexpected sources of resilience.

It was a bad choice, I can say this. I did not choose the husband well because people have to think carefully before choosing the man with whom they end up in life, but I really made a mistake . . . it was a bad choice [MI, no. 6, young woman from Morocco, 28 years old].

Even more interesting, in this light, is the testimony of this 20-year-old woman. Reflecting on the commuting between Italy and Pakistan that characterized her childhood and adolescence, this young woman at first hesitated before the “proposal” made by her parents. After having given her consent to the arranged marriage, she decided to separate and return to her parents’ home. However, she does not consider this choice definitive but rather open to negotiation, whose stakes comprise the possibility of freeing oneself from the excessive interference of the in-laws. Against the background of this personal story, there are two cultural universes that confront and clash, families of origin differently open to change, gender models and intergenerational relationships constantly evolving: a framework of constraints and opportunities within which the resilience strategies of our interviewee take shape.

In 2019 they made me the marriage proposal of this guy and at that time I hadn’t accepted but afterwards my grandfather talked to me a little bit and I at that time the only thing I

wanted was to leave this house, “I no longer want to live with you, I’m going away”—I said to my mom—“look if I get married, after that I won’t even come to your house and you will call me for years and years”. Later in January 2020 I got married and stayed with him for 21 days. It went well in the sense that it’s an arranged marriage. There were so many misunderstandings, I didn’t understand what he meant, he didn’t understand what I meant and above all he grew up there and I grew up here. It’s okay that I like my country, but I grew up here, the customs are those of Italy, not Bangladesh, but her family is a bit orthodox, they don’t want to understand, especially my mother-in-law doesn’t want to understand anything. I don’t know why they made me marry their son if they wanted a good girl, one who worked at home, one who kept an eye on the in-laws. I still hope my husband will get a move on and part ways with his parents. If he wants me to live with him, he has to give me a home. I can’t live with his parents [MI, no. 2, young woman from Bangladesh, 20 years old].

Finally, we can consider this excerpt, released by the interviewee, who probably suffers from a situation of greater vulnerability than all the other women in our sample. Nonetheless, the interviewee seems to deem education as a viaticum for women’s emancipation and will to affirm the potential for change that the experience of migration—and contamination with a more “open” culture—is nevertheless able to generate:

Our culture is too closed, for us the woman has to stay at home to be a housewife and that’s it, our women are not as strong as you say . . . if I did not study here, I would not have had the strength, I was at home, I did things of the work of home, then you get married and do the same things there too. But . . . I came here seeing people outside I learned, my mom doesn’t know many things, so practical how it works. However, at her age she now thinks that if perhaps she was studying, she did something, at least it was around . . . now that she is a bit old, she says: “I can’t take it anymore”. That is our problem, that some of our women are open, some are not [RE, no. 7, young woman from Pakistan, 27 years old].

4. Discussion

Within the extreme variety gathered under the term NEET, this present article has aimed at exploring the experience of a group of 19 young non-EU migrant women aged between 18 and 31 living in Italy, who at the time of their participation in this study were not in education, employment, or training (NEET status). According to the recent socio-demographic characterization of this specific category of NEET composed of inactive women with caring responsibilities, specifically childcare, we chose to select participants belonging to one of the national groups which, in Italy, have a women inactivity rate nearing or exceeding 70%. As a result of this, the sample comprises women coming from Pakistan, Bangladesh, Egypt, India, Morocco, and Tunisia. This choice mirrors the growing interest in research that has thus far documented the uniqueness of the NEET status of young migrant women mothers ([Jongbloed and Giret 2022](#); [Maguire 2018](#); [Pesquera et al. 2022a](#); [Russell 2016](#)) and outlined the importance of policies and initiatives addressed to this specific population.

The participant recruitment criteria adopted in this study provide a limited framework for capturing the diversity of NEET conditions. Nevertheless, these recruitment criteria made it possible to focus on a homogeneous group of young NEET women. Our interviewees share a migratory background and, in almost all cases except two, a family reunification migration path, often originating from an arranged marriage. Therefore, at the time of the interview, they were mostly married (or separated) and engaged in childcare activities, having soon fulfilled the cultural expectation of having children soon after marriage.

Beyond these common characteristics, the results also highlight the complexity and richness of the stories and experiences narrated by the 19 foreign women, composing a heterogeneous group marked by different levels of vulnerability and resilience capabilities, language skills, and involvement in the goal of finding a job. Thematic analysis carried out

on transcripts allowed us to identify and highlight both recurrent topics among interviewees and specific ones correlated based on participants' histories.

The perception of vulnerability that emerges from the women interviewed refers mainly to the relational dimension of life, which appears to be characterized by loneliness, a sense of isolation, and feelings of extraneousness (not belonging) with respect to an external context. Geographical distance from the families of origin and, above all, a low level of linguistic competence play a predominant role in these experiences. The latter—which also characterizes some women who have been living in Italy for a long time as well as those with higher qualifications—constitutes the main vulnerability factor at an individual level. Inadequate language skills and the experience of social isolation seem to reinforce each other in a vicious circle.

The impact on the country of immigration is marked by experiences of fatigue and great relational disorientation for these young women, almost all of whom are mothers of one or more children. Perceptions of their own vulnerability stem from continuous comparisons between pre- and post-migration relational life, and they seem to be reinforced by pile-ups of critical events that occurred in close proximity and/or within a few years of the post-migration time. These are women and mothers who have faced changes generated by normative and unforeseen events overlapping in a few years: migration, marriage, pregnancy, and childbirth in a new country, sometimes compounded by unforeseen events, such as marital separations, intimate partner violence, family bereavements, and the pandemic.

Outside the family, the condition of social isolation reported by the women interviewed is interrupted for some only thanks to the role played by the teachers of the Italian courses, real points of reference, not only on the instrumental level but on both the emotional and the motivational ones.

A more pronounced condition of vulnerability is that of single mothers who have been separated or abandoned by their partners and who have found shelter in reception communities or anti-violence centers thanks to the fundamental supporting role played by institutional systems of social services (Gennari et al. 2017).

Despite the difficulties on the relational level that confirm what has already been widely documented by migration studies, some positive elements seem to characterize the experience of the women interviewed and identify personal spaces of well-being, gratification, satisfaction, as well as trust and hope in the future. This finding is interesting because it is in line with the recent findings of the study by Jongbloed and Giret (2022). The results of the aforementioned study show that young women engaged in unpaid childcare work exhibit high levels of psychosocial well-being, particularly in comparison to the level of well-being of unemployed and other inactive NEETs.

The resources and strengths reported by our participants relate mainly to personal traits (e.g., optimism, determination, and a never give up attitude) and a variety of family-related aspects. The latter relates to the quality of family relationships (with the families of origin and with the husband), to the values transmitted at an intergenerational level that represent a fundamental identity anchor, and to the strength of normative expectations connected to intergenerational relationships. These expectations require the "success" of the family migration project and compliance both with gender roles dictated by breadwinner regimes and non-Western cultural norms governing the transition to adulthood. Therefore, the new family, together with the gratification derived from the experience of motherhood and the adherence to reinforced gender norms, constitutes a resilience factor precisely because of the duties it entails. The process of re-traditionalization of gender roles in post-migration may meet a need to adhere to well-known and safe roles in a period of great instability (Gennari et al. 2017). In this light, it has been also possible to understand how some interviewees deem arranged marriage something that translates into a factor of resilience: when it is accepted by the spouses and lived as an expression of conformity to a reassuring cultural model, it seems to generate a strong—and strengthening—sense of identity (Valtolina 2014).

Continuing this reflection, it can be said and deduced that the above-mentioned relational variables do not have intrinsic values as resources or vulnerabilities. Rather, there is no doubt that relational variables show and present an intrinsic ambivalence. In other words, relational variables can alternatively be perceived as resources or obstacles. Thus, for instance, from the perspective of those women who have faced and ‘survived’ parental disapproval, arranged marriage is a practice that produces suffering and subordination. Again, loyalty to the family migratory mandate and the tendency to reinforce the post-migration cultural norms of gender risk produces a compression of freedom and spaces of personal fulfillment whose cost—also in personal terms and the long term—it would be inaccurate to underestimate.

To conclude, it is interesting to reflect on the distance between interviewees’ educational investments and professional ambitions and their life choices in line with tradition, in which “women follow their husbands”. For many interviewees, even those who are more culturally well-qualified, the professional and educational situation is one of substantial stalemate, which sometimes ends up generating a form of disengagement from career goals and a substantial lack of a project. Given that our interviewees are essentially excluded/self-excluded from the Italian labor market, their daily lives are often strongly marked by the needs of small children and domestic duties, thus favoring a total identification with the role of wife and mother and with the classic male breadwinner regime.

However, it would be misleading to read the post-migratory condition—particularly when it has resulted in the process of “re-traditionalization” of gender roles—as a mere reproduction of patriarchal cultural models. It is also essential to consider both the context of the receiving society and the migration cultures and models followed by our interviewees.

Regarding the first, we have already observed that the working opportunities usually available to migrant women and the characters of the Italian welfare regime can discourage active job search, all the more so since they usually lack a strategic resource for many Italian families: grandparents who take care of their grandchildren while the parents work. Faced with a structure of not particularly attractive and advantageous job opportunities—often with conditions incompatible with “normal” family life, as in the case of the home-based caregiver—it can be understood that for many immigrant women, it is “convenient” to assume a traditional role, especially when it is consistent with the expectations of their husband. Unsurprisingly, single-parent women (who cannot “hiss” and take advantage of the role of wife) are crushed between definitively irreconcilable needs and expectations, and they experience frustration and suffer the inability of employment services to provide training and job offers compatible with their parental responsibilities. All this makes the young female NEETs paradigmatic examples of some structural deficiencies in Italian society.

However, alongside the latter, the limits of the culture of migration shared in the communities of origin must be considered. The issue of deficiencies in the Italian language is emblematic in this regard if we consider how even graduated women neglected the opportunity to acquire basic language skills in the months that preceded their expatriation. As a matter of fact, the Italian version of the so-called “integrationist turn” (Joppke 2007) is very “easygoing”. Following the example of many European countries (where newcomers are expected to enter different kinds of “integration pathways”—usually consisting in the attendance of language and civic education courses—and passing a test), Italy too introduced, in 2012, an integration agreement, but this provision is applied with ample flexibility, without implying effective consequences for those who do not comply with the obligation to learn the Italian idiom, particularly for the holders of a stay permit for family reasons. Apparently “pro-immigrant”, this orientation helps to explain why many women who entered Italy through the reunification scheme do not have, even many years after their arrival, a sufficient level of linguistic competence, exposing them to all the consequences described above. The results of our study, therefore, suggest the opportunity to encourage the learning of the Italian language immediately after entry, if not through the implementation of ad hoc pre-departure programs.

A similar argument can be made about the problem of recognizing qualifications acquired abroad, the difficulty of which contributes to explaining the dramatic phenomenon of immigrants' overqualification. The few existing studies have documented the many reasons that make the recognition procedure difficult and its outcome uncertain (Zanfrini and Bonetti 2013). This surely calls into question the responsibility of the Italian institutions to strengthen interventions to support immigrants, sign agreements with the countries of origin, invest in supplementary training, and make employers aware of the opportunity to recognize the human capital of immigrants even in lack of formal certification. However, also, in this case, it must be noted that migratory models and family models induce women to neglect the relevance of this aspect before their departure or to give up getting involved in a procedure that is complex but certainly useful for increasing employability and the chances of self-realization.

Ultimately, what emerges is the lack of a "project" from the Italian society, which is giving up investing in a valuable component for its growth and sustainability, and by the immigrant women themselves, who arrived in Italy pursuing a marriage and family project, but without a real "project for themselves".

5. Conclusions

To conclude, the empirical evidence gathered by this study underlines the consequences of the lack of policies targeted to reunited spouses and their specific needs, in line with an argument already stressed in both literature and pro-migrant discourse. At the same time, the analysis of the interviews suggests the social and psychological costs stemming from the lack of a real pre-migration project capable of supporting the integration of these young women, not only in terms of access to the labor market but in a broader social sense.

For our participants, the main burden of the lack of a personal and family project seems to be deep loneliness and social isolation that is difficult to break. This condition of isolation is balanced by the rewards of having young children and multiple caregiving responsibilities. It is precisely the taking on of the mother's role that marks their transition towards adulthood (which, for many Italian NEETs, remains unfinished and blocked). Therefore, the new family roles resulting from it represent a great strategic resource in terms of identity and personal satisfaction in the present.

What will be the impact of this situation on the psychological well-being and sense of personal fulfilment of these women in the long run (e.g., when their children grow up) remains instead a largely unexplored question (Jongbloed and Giret 2022). The phrase '*Look at me, but better*' (RE, no. 2), with which one of our interviewees expresses the need to be 'looked at' and 'valued' by the host society is revealing of a sphere of personal desires and ambitions that risk being postponed indefinitely, removed, and stifled.

Our study presents some limitations. The first limitation is represented by the small number of interviews that were conducted, restricted to two urban areas in Northern Italy. The second limitation relates to the language difficulties that characterized the carrying out of interviews, preventing—despite the presence of mediators—a greater depth in the exploration of the topics. Thirdly, our sample is the result of a self-selection process which probably jeopardizes its representativeness with respect to the reality of the most vulnerable situations within the group of migrant women in NEET status. Finally, it is a qualitative, cross-sectional study that does not capture the processual and dynamic nature of vulnerability processes and, with it, the long-term consequences and life adjustments.

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