

Debordering family reproduction: Care circulation and transnational marriages between Morocco and Italy

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— Article —

Abstract

Objective: The purpose of this article is to rethink the concept of care circulation by linking it to the notion of social reproduction, with a focus on transnational marriages between Morocco and Italy.

Background: Moroccan settlement in Italy is shaped by transnational, gender, and intergenerational relationships through which mobility and family projects have become increasingly intertwined. Marriage plays a pivotal role in this process, as the evolution of life courses, mobility trajectories, and kinship networks hinges on it.

Method: The analysis draws on 50 unstructured, in-depth interviews conducted primarily with women, although men were also involved. Most interviews took place in participants' homes and were embedded within broader social encounters lasting two hours or more. The fieldwork therefore also incorporated periods of observation and systematic ethnographic note-taking.

Results: The article traces how care circulates across the Mediterranean to facilitate transnational matchmaking. It highlights how families and relatives in countries of origin support migrants' family needs in countries of destination, rather than care flowing solely in the opposite direction. Furthermore, it shows that family transnationalism encompasses not only relationships maintained across distance but also the formation of proximity relationships and processes of emplacement.

Conclusion: Approaching transnational marriages through the lens of care circulation opens up new avenues for examining family reproduction and the horizons through which it is imagined and sustained.

Key words: transnational marriages; care circulation; social reproduction; kinship; Moroccan migration



1. Introduction

The purpose of this article is to rethink the concept of care circulation by linking it to the notion of social reproduction. I preliminary outline social reproduction as the material and symbolic processes through which individuals and collectivities perpetuate themselves, grounded in personal care, family roles and intergenerational transmission (Kofman 2012). My analysis proposes to rethink care circulation by focusing on salient events of the family cycle such as transnational marriages, understood as marital unions composed of individuals of the same nationality or national origin, of which at least one is a migrant, who are connected through kinship and/or community ties (Beck-Gernsheim 2007; Charsley 2012; Williams 2010). I examine the specific forms of care circulation that underpin the formation of transnational marriages, adopting the perspective of mobile subjects who enact pivotal life course developments such as pairing and family building. I reconstruct the role kinship plays to this end, exploring how it works as a key terrain of networking in the matchmaking process and effectively operates in circumstances of prolonged (im)mobility, distance and separation. In so doing, I investigate how families and kin deploy circuits of solidarity and care across space and generations and identify how these circuits underlie transnational processes of social reproduction. The research thus brings to the fore not only how families maintain a sense of belonging despite distance and absence, but also how they engender and expand their family lives across migration.

This analysis is based on individual and couple stories collected as part of fieldwork I conducted among Moroccan households in Italy. My argument is that a collective investment in care circulation is mobilized across the Mediterranean and this investment enables new family units to form and additional kinship relationships to be woven. Such a process is sustained by households and kinship networks caring for individuals from a distance, supporting them in couple-matching, wedding celebrations and the process of setting up households abroad. By acknowledging the relevance of these life transitions particularly in circumstances of mobility and displacement, my analysis shows that the care flow enabling the formation of transnational marriages can be considered a particularly valuable *reverse remittance* (Mazzucato 2011). I argue that this perspective significantly expands the scope of the care circulation research field (Baldassar and Merla 2014; Baldassar et al. 2014), especially given that the range of processes, practices, and relationships which boost the horizons of migrants' social reproduction across displacement have yet to be exhaustively explored. Exchange flows can be seen as multidirectional when considered in this perspective, as I outline 1) how families and relatives from countries of origin support migrants' care in the country of destination, and not only vice versa; 2) how transnationalism and the circulation of care allow individuals to achieve conditions of household proximity, and not only maintain family relationships at a distance.

The arguments I present begin with a theoretical reconsideration of the concepts of care and social reproduction in relation to the debate on family transnationalism (Baldassar and Merla 2014; Baldassar et al. 2014; Bryceson and Vuorela 2002; Bryceson 2019; Kilkey et al. 2018). I continue this conceptual review with a focus on transnational marriages, adopted here as specific field of exploration. I then delineate the evolution of the migratory flow that spans Morocco and Italy, considering in particular how it has transformed in terms of gender composition. Finally, based on qualitative data, my analysis considers how mate selection has taken place across migration, examining how marriage events are interrelated with and triggered by transnational kinship networks. In this context, I explore the way care circulates to support migrants' family reproduction from and beyond the context of origin.

2. Care circulation and social reproduction: reframing notions, bridging theories

The theoretical premise underlying my empirical analysis stems from a conceptual move to reconnect the notion of care to the broader sphere of social reproduction. As Kofman (2012) points out, care and reproduction are social activities that, despite being closely interrelated, have been discussed through different research streams which have not built on each other as much as they could have. In this vein, I take up Baldassar and Merla's invitation to explore new perspectives on care circulation by developing two lines of inquiry in this section: first, I review the debate on social reproduction and care with the aim of disentangling notions that have often been conflated; second, I introduce a further element to this debate, namely the role marriages play in broadening family reproduction toward transnational horizons.

2.1 Social reproduction, transnational families and the perpetuation of life

According to a significant strand of research, the sphere of social reproduction is secondary to productive forces, encompassing the roles, means, and functions through which labour power is perpetuated and enabled to operate¹. Feminist scholars have made a key contribution to this research stream: by stressing the relevance of women's unwaged, domestic labour, they have highlighted the historically feminized character of reproductive work, how it plays a hidden role in the private sphere, and how its value ends up overlooked in a way that naturalizes gender roles (Duffy 2007; Guillaumin 2002; Laslett and Brenner, 1989; Petersen 2003). Setting out from this perspective, research has further broadened the focus on the reproductive sphere to consider the sphere of everyday life, that is, the way social systems are produced and maintained, gender, class and racial inequalities are perceived as given and, as pointed out by Bourdieu (1972), education, social capital and habitus contribute to reinforcing the status quo. Thanks to this approach, our understanding of reproduction has moved beyond the narrow focus on industrial relations. Motherhood, in this context, has been recognized as an emblematic field of research for investigating social reproduction in that it illustrates historical variations (Kertzer 1993) as well as incorporating symbolic, emotional, and cultural life dimensions into the scope of social reproduction (Reay 2005).

The notion of care entered the debate from this standpoint, encouraging researchers to focus more specifically on those relationships and skills that enable the material and emotional existence of people who cannot or do not want to do so by themselves. These relationships and this care-work typically take place in the minute, private routines of daily life. As such, care includes a wide range of roles and activities, from nurturing or cleaning and tidying up to supervising, protecting and comforting, activities that may take place both at home and in the extra-domestic sphere, and which are often embodied and emotionally binding (Finch and Groves 2022). The structural transitions of late capitalism have increased the demand for care and boosted the personal and service economy: more now than in the past, this economy now relies on large numbers of migrants, mostly women (Anderson 2000; Ehrenreich 2003; Ehrenreich and Hochschild 2003; Truong 1996). It is in this perspective that, through the *care chain* approach, scholars have come to view family reproduction as a global, unequal process of care transfer that has disruptive effects on the well-being of migrant female workers and their families left behind (Hochschild 2000, 2005; Parreñas 2001, 2005a, 2005b; Yeates 2009, 2012).

Adopting a different standpoint, Baldassar and Merla have contributed to the debate by introducing the concept of *care circulation*. This concept provides an alternative view of the way migrants and their families deal with the global rearticulation of productive and reproductive household roles (Baldassar and Merla 2013; Baldassar et al. 2014). The care circulation approach builds on the idea that caregiving and intimacy are not necessarily enacted through bodily, symbiotic closeness, and that the experience of family as a local, nuclear set of cohabitants is an historical notion rather than a universal fact. Reasoning on this basis, Baldassar and Merla find that care skills are not simply pulled away from migrants' families and communities by being performed for employers; rather, these care skills are actually embedded in affective and social bonds which are maintained and developed even at a distance. In so doing, they retrace the multiple, combined ways through which care can be transformed, exchanged and conveyed, thereby making it possible for migrants and their families to maintain and morally nurture familial relationships from a distance and in the caregiver's absence.

I specifically draw on Baldassar and Merla's idea of re-connecting care and migration as a research field to the stream of family studies while backgrounding the understanding of care as work and its relevance in the global, neoliberal evolution of the labour market. Viewed in this way, care and transnationalism prove a vibrant area of investigation, understood as migrants' primary sphere of practices and meanings and not as a secondary sphere of economic forces. This perspective, indeed, has diverted research from considering caregiving and globalization mainly in terms of extraction and the transfer of economic value. Instead, the focus falls on the intrinsic feature of care, that is, the production of social value and how it continues to take place in contexts where the local social structures are being transformed by significant emigration rates.

Baldassar and Merla show that care stems from social relations and engenders social resources, aspects that can be transformed but not extinguished by commodification and displacement. In contexts facing increasing socioeconomic and environmental vulnerability, the notion of care circulation acquires new relevance as a perspective for understanding the social practices that enable life to endure and achieve

1 See Norton and Katz 2017 for a review.

resilience. In this view, mobility is a condition that makes particularly evident how individuals and their households adjust and subvert their behaviours and patterns to deal with new conditions of survival and perpetuation (Clarke and Haraway 2018). Conceived in terms of movements, flows, and multiple exchanges, transnationalism and the circulation of care can be seen as social articulations through which families are able to cope with the extreme life circumstances caused by distance and absence (Baldassar et al. 2018; Kilkey et al. 2018).

If understood as an adaptive response to new life conditions, however, the notion of care circulation needs – and this is my point here – to be more effectively entangled with the concept of social reproduction. In other words, I argue that the processes underpinned by care circulation are more complex and articulated than mere caregiving and maintaining family relationships. Not coincidentally, a great deal of research conducted from the perspective of care circulation investigates how the household members who once lived in close proximity manage their relationships at a distance; how they care for each other and the routines they adopt to maintain a sense of family belonging when they are far apart; how the advancement of digital communications has supported such processes; and, more recently, how border enforcement policies and migrants' legal status put family transnationalism at risk (Brandhorst et al. 2020; Merla et al. 2020). These analyses of family stories take separation as the main beginning of their temporal line, and the processes they scrutinize have to do with the rearticulation of family life and its care flows across the time and space of mobility.

And yet, I argue, we could pursue a different interpretation of the processes at a stake by expanding the scope of the care circulation approach to consider how new relationships are established on a transnational scale, how the family cycle evolves beyond its original bonds and boundaries, and how kin relationships are revisited and engendered throughout this process. After all, family life is embedded in a wider kaleidoscope of social bonds and spheres of belonging through which life courses develop. To capture these processes in a systematic theoretical framework, I trace them back to a definition of social reproduction as the array of relationships, social practices, dispositions and symbolic references people mobilize on a global scale to protect and perpetuate existence both in the everyday present and in view of the future (Bjeren 1997; Laslett and Brenner, 1989; Kofman, 2012; Nakano Glenn 1992). Such a research perspective overcomes economic reductionism: as Kofman (2012, 144) insightfully stresses, “the reference to family and kinship highlights the fact that reproduction takes place not just through labour processes and clear-cut economic migration but also through other circuits of migration such as marriage, which create new families as well as the reunification of existing ones”.

What my analysis aims to point out, therefore, is the way care circulation underlies and makes possible transnational processes of social reproduction. A perspective of this kind definitely widens our horizon of attention beyond families divided by migration, to also explore: 1) how pivotal bonds and events of social reproduction such as couple matching, marriage and divorce, cohabitation and making a home, births and deaths, but also siblinghood and cousinhood, adulthood and generations are enacted when life courses and the family cycle span transnationally; and 2) how kinship, actual or fictive (Carsten 2004), underlies this process, considering that relatives not only shore up the relational horizons of migrants along their routes (Andrikopoulos 2023; Cole and Groes 2016) but migrants themselves also engender, perform and regenerate relatedness by creating new family relationships and establishing new kin bonds. These processes entail conflicts and inequalities, as several studies show: social reproduction is an historically segmented arena in which positions and chances to marry, have and raise children, and establish a household are highly differentiated and hierarchized, under extremely varied historical, structural and cultural conditions (Colen 1995; Ginsburg Rapp 1991, 1995; Kertzer 1993). Research questions for investigating care circulation thus focus on the circuits care flows through, the factors that boost or impede its exchanges and, ultimately, who is destined to support another's reproduction, who is enabled to start a family and have descendants, and who is neglected or excluded from the circle.

2.2 Marriages, life courses and the transnational circuits of kinship solidarity

Transnational marriages, as defined in the introduction, are an eloquent arena for understanding care circulation through the lens of social reproduction. These conjugal unions represent a substantial component of contemporary family migrations: a variety of migrants on a global scale, from different ethno-racial, national, class, and religious backgrounds, draw on personal relationships and community ties to find support in locating a mate. Thanks to this practice, a multitude of individual trajectories can be turned

into household projects – and these households are largely, albeit controversially, established in the destination country. In the current era of resurgent nationalism, transnational marriages have come under twofold political attention. On one side, these conjugal formations – like other types of cross-border marriages (Brettel 2017) – are viewed with suspicion in that they are considered a potentially fraudulent way of circumventing restrictive immigration politics; as such, they are seen as a stratagem that undermines state sovereignty (D'Aoust 2022; Moret et al. 2021). On the other side, transnational marriages are considered the highest expression of endogamy, a threat to the liberal pillars of democratic countries², and treated as an indicator of failed assimilation (Baykara-Krumme 2017; Zantvliet et al. 2014) and the basis of majority-minority societies (Alba 2020).

From a different perspective, various mainly qualitative studies show that the migratory process has been historically bolstered by transnational marriages in that such unions represent a common practice through which migratory flows composed of single, temporary workers evolve into stable family settlements (Gabaccia 1994; Werbner 1990). In current regimes of contested mobility and legal violence, (Bélanger and Silvey R. 2020; Glick Schiller and Salazar 2013; Menjivar 2014, 2026; Turner 2007, 2010) conjugal arrangements, mediated and supported by personal bonds, are an increasingly looked-to way for individuals to broaden both their conjugal choices and chances of being able to migrate (Andrikopoulos 2023; D'Aoust 2022; Elliot 2021; Ali 2007). As research conducted from this perspective has highlighted, agency and mobility are deployed through these marriage-scapes (Constable 2005), even in cases of arranged matches (Beck-Gernsheim 2007; Beck and Beck-Gernsheim 2010). By dissecting the processes and relationships through which marriage and migration interrelate, these studies reveal that unpredictable gender and generational dynamics arise within the couple, between parents and children, and in the kinship sphere more broadly (Bertolani 2017; Charsley 2006; Decimo 2022, 2024; Pande 2021; Shaw and Charsley 2006; Timmerman 2008).

My argument is based on this thread of studies and specifically their finding that kinship plays a key role in shaping and sustaining migrants' life courses (Andrikopoulos 2023; Cole and Groes 2016). Moving beyond an understanding of conjugality as involving secluded duos or *pure relationships* (Giddens 1991; 1992), this research perspective foregrounds the ways that individuals face global mobility and displacement challenges by maintaining and cultivating kin-based relationships of mutual obligation rather than rejecting them. My analysis aims to build on and advance this line of inquiry by framing the intertwining of marriage and migration as a collective investment through which family transnationalism is deepened and expanded to encompass more individuals, households and generations. Based on the idea that transnational marriages entrench spheres of kinship and belonging which extend beyond the couple themselves (Decimo 2022), I frame the networks through which matchmaking and migration take place as circuits of care and family reproduction. In this vein and with the following empirical analysis, I show that migrants and non-migrants maintain a sense of familyhood despite distance and absence by participating in and fostering, through marriage, the evolution of individual trajectories and the family cycle. Caregiving across migration is not limited to protecting individuals and the family at a distance, when viewed in this way. Rather, we can see how care and belonging develop when life-course transitions such as forming a couple and starting a family take place, when individuals reposition themselves, personhood transforms, and household boundaries are redrawn. By adopting this lens, my research aims to shed light on the way care circulates through kin networks to the point of debordering individual and family futures, extending them beyond migrants' places of origin. This process, in the end, relates to the politics of self-perpetuation pursued by dispersed families and diasporic communities. It calls into question how social reproduction is deployed in circumstances of displacement and the way family formation and intergenerational transmission are consequently shaped and articulated. In this view, transnational marriages are understood as life course events that migrants and their families pursue even in extreme conditions of separation and constrained mobility as they continue striving to forge families and generations. As such, care circulation and transnational marriages can be seen as family articulations through which mobile subject resist the processes of individualization, gender imbalance, homogenization, and massification implied by poor labour migration (Murphy 2017; Withers and Liu 2026).

2 See Charsley et al. 2020 on this concern.

3. A note on methodology

The reasoning I develop in this analysis is based on fieldwork that, despite being conducted several years ago now, has proved particularly relevant in our current moment of restricted mobility, nationalistic resurgence, and new right-wing family politics. Given Loretta Baldassar and Laura Merla's invitation to rethink how the notion of care circulation maintains its fruitfulness in such dark times for migrants and their families, I realized that there were arguments growing out of my previous analyses (Decimo 2024) that still deserved to be unpacked and discussed.

Specifically, the data I present were collected between October 2013 and November 2014 through 50 interviews conducted with Moroccan individuals whose families live in Italy. The study reconstructed participants' life trajectories and explored their household settlement, paying particular attention to the intersections between migration, marriage, and childbirth. Fieldwork was conducted primarily in Bologna and the province of Trento, two contexts characterized by a high density of family-based settlements that offered rich opportunities for ethnographic investigation. Data collection was mainly carried out through recorded, unstructured, in-depth interviews in Italian. Alongside these conversations, the fieldwork also included moments of observation and systematic ethnographic note-taking.

I conducted the interviews together with two research assistants, and our team met regularly to exchange insights, refine our approach, and discuss emerging interpretations. The interviews were addressed primarily to the women, but husbands were not excluded, and in 10 cases they took part in the fieldwork. We carefully avoided any behaviour that might be perceived as judgemental, distrustful or intrusive. For this reason, we did not ask to meet spouses separately but rather invited individuals to participate in the fieldwork alone or as couples, as they preferred. A minority of the interviews (8 cases) were conducted with couples and appeared to involve particularly harmonious partners. All the other interviews – that is to say, the vast majority – were conducted with individuals, thus allowing personal voices and conflictual narratives about marital relationships to emerge.

Most interviews took place in the participants' homes and were embedded in broader social encounters lasting two hours or more. It was common for us to begin by socializing with family members and neighbours – sharing mint tea and exchanging stories about everyday life – before moving on to formal interviews. Children were frequently present, and conversations often unfolded in the midst of ordinary domestic activities. On several occasions, informal group discussions naturally emerged, involving both adults and the adolescents who were present; these spontaneous exchanges revolved around topics they themselves considered meaningful. As a result, the ethnographic environment surrounding the interviews was exceptionally rich and dynamic.

The relevance of the transnational dimension of their family life surfaced in both the stories they told and the observations we made. As the following analysis makes clear, the conjugal narratives we collected through the interviews are strongly embedded in transnational relationships. However, the same local, domestic environments where most of the research took place were also imbued with transnational references: from the way homes were furnished with Moroccan sofas and decorations to the way food was prepared, often in our presence, using new recipes just shared through social networks with relatives in Morocco, and the Moroccan TV channels that were constantly playing in the background.

Communication developed in an empathetic manner, guided more by participants' sensitivities and the natural rhythm of their storytelling than by any rigid interview protocol. No major ethical issues arose during the research process, largely due to the strong relationships we had built during the preparatory phase. Participants' trust was further reinforced by clear assurances of confidentiality: all the names in this article are pseudonyms, and identifying details have been modified or omitted to safeguard privacy. For the analysis, I employed a biographical approach (Bertaux 1981; Bertaux & Kohli 1984; Bornat 2004, 2008; Chamberlayne et al. 2000; Plummer 2001) inspired by the ethnographic method (Beaud 2018; Elliot 2021; Sayad 1999; Vacchiano 2021). While the interviews followed an open narrative structure rather than a fixed set of questions, they were oriented toward key biographical themes such as family background, couple formation and settlement in Italy, childbirth experiences, gender roles, family organization and transnational connections.

The analysis was built by reading and re-reading the interviews and observation notes, letting recurrent themes surface while also focusing on individual cases. I proceeded by cross-comparing both themes and individual trajectories in order to piece together and consider multiple aspects: on one side, practices and meanings of transnational marriages and, on the other side, how these practices and meanings were co-

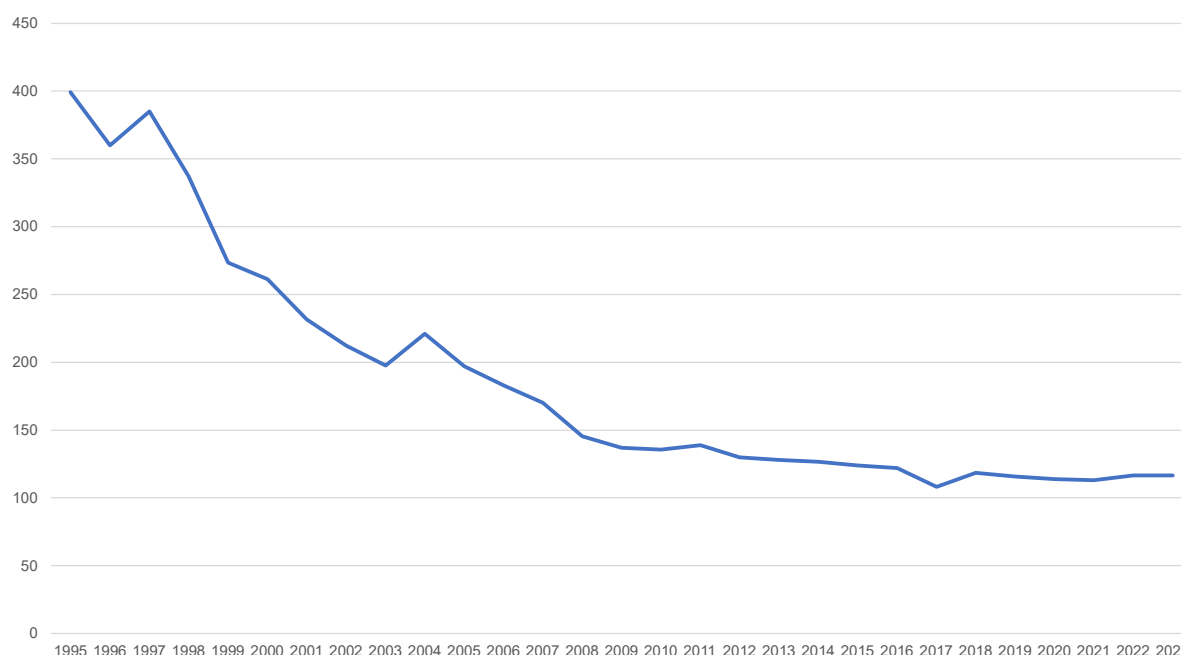
constructed by individuals and their social networks. I developed my interpretation by identifying similarities and differences and considering how each trajectory illuminated others – sometimes by contrast – ultimately allowing a shared interpretive framework to take shape.

4. Migration and marriages between Morocco and Italy

Migration from Morocco to Italy began in the 1980s, coinciding with a widespread move in northern European countries to curb immigration and a shift in southern European nations from countries of emigration to immigrant destinations (King 2000; Van Mol and de Valk 2016). As various scholars (Decimo 2005; Maher 2011; Salih 2003; Zontini 2010) have noted, the initial wave of migrants consisted mainly of two types of working men: married men who migrated for economic reasons, leaving their wives behind and sending remittances home, and young single men who viewed migration as a personal opportunity to improve their lives and transition into adulthood. From the late 1980s onward, however, many married men began to settle permanently in Italy and brought their families to join them. Crucially, the arrival of wives and daughters strengthened ties with female relatives and led to an increase in female migration. Many of these women married men who had initially migrated as bachelors, allowing this first group of male migrants to marry after migration rather than before and opening new paths for women's mobility and life trajectories.

Over time, these patterns have led to a significant shift in the gender balance of Moroccan migration to Italy, with increasing numbers of women participating in what was once a predominantly male migration flow (fig. 1). This shift highlights the growing role of women in the migratory experience, not only in terms of quantity but also in terms of the diverse choices, family strategies, and gender dynamics through which they have come to play an increasingly central role in shaping migration processes (Decimo 2005).

Figure 1: Sex ratio trend of Moroccan immigrants in Italy (1995-2023)



Note: <https://demo.istat.it/tavole/?t=permessi&l=it> for the years 1995–2008; <https://demo.istat.it/tavole/?l=it&t=noncomunitari> for the years 2008–2021; and on Istat (2023a) for the 2023

These developments laid the groundwork for the formation of transnational networks in which migration and marriage have become increasingly interconnected for young Moroccans. Especially during the early years – when the Moroccan population in Italy was predominantly male – choosing a bride from one's country of origin was a common and often preferred option (Decimo 2005; Salih 2003; Zontini 2010). Today, single men and women may be migrants seeking new mobility experiences or second-generation

youth raised in Italy. In both cases, marriage still plays a central role in shaping long-term plans and decisions about settlement (Decimo 2024; Elliot 2021; Vacchiano 2021).

5. Matchmaking and family transnationalism

Marriage constitutes a pivotal tie through which family bonds evolve into kinship relationships. More than an institution, it entails processes and events through which individuals reposition themselves in relation to their family of origin (Carsten et al. 2021). As such, marriage profoundly calls into question the process of intergenerational transmission and solidarity, how it is performed, the family configurations it encompasses, and the kinship dynamics being deployed. The interrelation of marriage with migration increases the density of all these dimensions (Maunaguru 2019, 2021), thus forming a field of analysis that is particularly fruitful for understanding how families and relatives participate in or are excluded from migrants' family choices. The conjugal formations interwoven over time between Morocco and Italy are particularly rich in offering such insights.

When the interviewed couples were asked to recount how they met and married and the role migration played, they consistently highlighted one key distinction: the difference between "traditional" and "modern" forms of matchmaking. Following the commonly accepted interpretations of these terms, more than half of the couples in my study described their union as "traditional," meaning it had been arranged or facilitated by parents or relatives. In some instances, the partners had never met before the arrangement; in most cases, however, the spouses were already acquainted, often through family ties, neighbourhood connections, or other long-term relationships. Being able to rely on family and relatives to find the right marriage partner is considered quite valuable, especially if there are few chances to meet prospective partners in the immigration context. Youssef makes this point clear when describing how a "traditional" match was arranged for him between Italy and Morocco:

So, there was a family nearby, they went to a wedding, and they saw her... they [his family] know that I was looking for a girl to marry because I am here [in Italy] ... I can't, I don't have time to be looking for a girl like that. You know, we're a bit ... conservative ... do you understand what I mean by this? We are different from you, to marry, we have this culture [...] so, to look for a girl you have to ask the family, find out about her background, how she was educated, these things are important (Youssef)

He delegated the task of finding the right spouse to family and neighbours; they suggested a candidate, then the potential groom and bride met. The potential spouses' consent to the suggested match was part of the ritual because, as he stresses during the interview, they were "the party in question!"

On the other side, a slightly smaller number of couples recounted a "modern" approach to matchmaking, that is, initiated independently by the partners themselves after meeting on their own. The following accounts from Nahla and Sana offer a female perspective on how transnational marriage took place through social networks spanning Italy, Morocco and Spain:

We are both from Casablanca. He comes from a family that lives below my dad's house, and he used to visit his aunt and then—a glimpse! [...] In Morocco it's not like it is here, that you just pick someone up and take them home. He saw me, asked his aunt, she said I was a good girl. His aunt had gone to dad—I had talked to my mom—I was 18. Then, little by little, love grows. (Nahla)

He didn't live here [in Italy], he lived in Spain... but I used to spend time with his mother and sister and every now and then I saw him when he came to them, to visit them. One day he decided to settle here with his parents... And from that point, we began to see each other. (Sana)

Nahla and Sana were the ones to initiate their matches and, in a "modern" way, advocate for it with their families rather than the other way around. However, even in their cases, they met their husbands – in Morocco and Italy, respectively – through a mix of family and neighbour relationships similar to those of Youssef's household.

What is relevant to highlight here is that, despite the declared differences, the underlying relational dynamics of the matching process in all cases, as with the many other couple stories I collected, essentially

share two significant features. First, the choice to marry is always deployed through the involvement of a broader, transnational network of belonging; family, but also more distant relatives and neighbours, are indeed the relational horizon of reference that increases the chances of a match being made. Second, even couples who met autonomously do seek parental consent, often through patient negotiation and relational work. Sana's story goes on to explain which customs and norms should be followed when dating someone to avoid being sanctioned, but also feeling free to break up if things do not work out:

They do not accept the fact that ... they believe that the man must come to ask your parents for your hand. We dated for a short time, we saw that we were getting along, after that he introduced himself
So, you are saying that, even just to date, a man should already ask ...

Ask for your hand, yes ... then if it doesn't work out and everything goes wrong, the engagement is broken ... so at least people don't say that she is seeing him secretly ... We did it secretly for a little while ... after, we ... we told everyone, he came to ask for my hand, my parents agreed, I agreed, and that's it, we started dating (Sana)

Nihad describes a very similar situation, except that the setting is Morocco where she is going to spend the holidays with her family. She is in a relationship with a young man she met in Italy who also plans to spend the summer in their country of origin, and he suggests they continue dating there as well. Given the different context, she makes clear that he needs to respect the stricter family norms that apply there. He does not disappoint her:

After 6 months [of dating] I went to Morocco and he also came afterwards and he was like, "ah, I'll see you around." I answered him: "but you know, we are in Morocco...it's not like we're in Italy! In Morocco you know, I can't go out... we have, you know, another world." And then I say: "look, if you really love me, if you want me, then you have to introduce yourself to my parents." He is from Casablanca, I am from Khouribga....we are 120 km apart! So, he brought his family, his parents, and his brothers came there to talk to my parents! (Nihad)

All these stories evolve around a key point: the new transnational kinship relations that could be interwoven through the marriage. This is the aspect that, despite individual differences, fuels the circulation of information, reciprocal exchanges and the participation of families, relatives and communities in the pairing process. Individuals may have led independent and self-determined lives, considering migration as a rite of passage (Kandel and Massey 2002) consistent with the formation of their autonomous personhood to the point of detaching from family obligations. However, if conjugal preferences bring relationships that are considered significant and valuable into the family, they serve to reinvigorate transnational circuits of belonging and intergenerational transmission. Many of the men's stories unfolded along this life course trajectory, but it is significant to observe a similar trajectory from a female perspective, as the following story from Nawar eloquently expresses. Nawar migrated to Italy as a single woman and had a first marriage with an Italian man, against her parents' will. The relationship did not work out, so she decided to divorce him. Some time later, while in Italy, she met a young man who was from the same village as her and became engaged to him. In the following account, Nawar explains that in this case she did obtain her parents' approval for the betrothal; it was officiated at a distance and in the couples' absence via a public ceremony held in the village. Her account makes clear that the formal ritual does not matter compared to social recognition of the conjugal relationship and the way it effectively strengthens kinship bonds:

We were in Italy and his family went to my parents to get consent. Then they held the engagement without us. We didn't go, we didn't have time. The official marriage is another thing, there you read from the Koran between two [Fetiha] and my father gave consent to his father in front of all the men. But I didn't want to go through with the marriage act...I wanted to do everything slowly, but then the child arrived! On that day, we exchange rings just like you do here...but I have not exchanged any rings! I put the ring here and took it over here [moving an old ring from one finger to another]. Then I went [to Morocco] because people had to know who the lady is, why not let us see her, she's a bit ugly. Then afterwards we did one in Arezzo, too, so this way if I go there, no one will gossip. He wanted to do it, he invited all his family, because he has a large family. We did it and everyone knows that we are husband and wife even if we don't have a marriage certificate. (Nawar)

Taking these common features of the pairing process, we can draw out a conceptual point around which the following analysis pivots: the distinction between marriage by choice and arranged marriage is not a useful research key for understanding how transnational marriages underpin the evolution of the family cycle between Morocco and Italy. As these stories make evident – along with all the other ones I mapped, and similarly to the findings from other studies (Bertolani 2017; Charsley 2006; Decimo 2022; Pande 2021; Shaw and Charsley 2006; Timmerman 2008) – personal relationships and parental approval always play a significant role in the decision to marry, whether in terms of arranging or sponsoring the match, or simply acknowledging it, particularly if relatedness is at stake. This means that marriage as a life event remains firmly embedded in family relationships and ties households together, thereby creating kinship. Most importantly, migration enhances this process rather than weakening it. In this perspective, marriages generate a significant space for the evolution of family transnationalism: as I will argue below, circuits of care and belonging operate through this domain to a substantial extent.

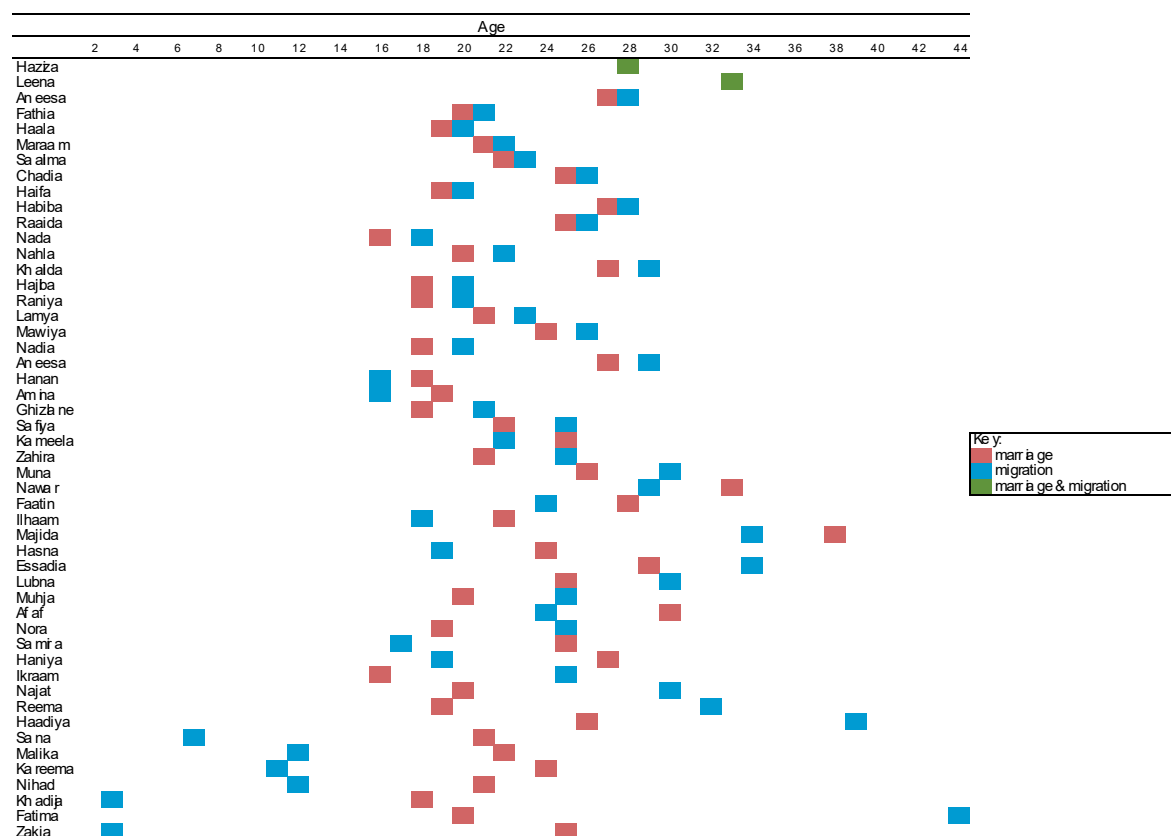
6. Transnational marriages, care circulation and the relocation of family reproduction

Family reunification and marriages have been key to driving the demographic evolution of migratory flows between Morocco and Italy. Transnational matches in particular are now an integral part of a marriage arena that young people take into account when deciding who to start a family with and where to do so. Tastes, desires, and habitus (Bourdieu 1972, 2008) change accordingly, giving rise to life course horizons that increasingly intertwine conjugal and mobility choices. Saalima expresses very clearly how the chance to marry a man with whom she could also move to Europe represented an appealing option. In her story like the ones considered above, the match was made through the brokerage of a relative:

It was enough, it's [not necessary] that much time, I saw [him] once, for a month, through his sister. He came to Casablanca, he's been in Italy for many years, he came to visit his sister. He came to visit me, he asked me if I wanted to get married, and so on. I had the idea that I wanted to get married, that it would make me happy, to a gentleman, and then there was the idea of my coming to Europe, of my having a family, and everything else (Saalima)

This excerpt illustrates another trait of these unions, that is, the rapidity of the process. Figure 2 portrays marriage and migration events as they unfold by age among the women whose life stories I collected. For most of them, the two events are closely interrelated. In particular, for the women who arrived in Italy as adults, their migration was pulled by marriage and the two events very often take place in a short period of time – typically just the time needed to obtain bureaucratic approval for reunification. This interrelation of life course events is significant, especially given that many women's first pregnancy often also takes place within the same time frame (Decimo 2021, 2024). This means that Moroccan conjugal couples and their offspring do not remain separated for several years as was customary in the past – and is still very common for other migratory flows (Hannaford 2017). The evident speed shows just how routine these matches have become and points to the array of norms, habits, and social relationships that effectively underpin these matters of mobility and family.

Figure 2: Marriage and migration events by age over female life course



Note: Author's own elaboration based on fieldwork data.

Specifically, this evolution of life courses shows how a transnational marriage arena has been constructed through the circular movements of individuals and families between Morocco and Italy. Over time, such a process has given rise to a Moroccan culture of migration (Elliot 2021) that makes not only individual mobility but also the chance to start a family in Europe a regular feature of life course expectations and wishes. Parents, kin, and neighbours sustain this evolution of the household reproductive cycle: transnational marriages are indeed supported by their social networking and commitment to a vision of family life that encompasses the idea of such couples and their descendants living abroad. Lubna's and Hassan's stories provide a window onto the way families based in Morocco arrange the matches of couples who are expected to settle down in Italy. Lubna lived in Rabat, where she studied economics at the university. As her story makes clear, the marriage proposal came from his parents who were engaged in locating a wife for their son based in Italy. On the other hand, Hassan's tale reveals the kind of kinship interrelations that underpin the arrangement of a transnational marriage. In this story as well, it was his mother who took care of finding the right wife for her son, looking among the circle of her daughter-in-law's relatives who had already settled in Italy with another of her sons. What is relevant to stress, in both cases, is these mothers' engagement in supporting the household settlements of their sons on the other side of Mediterranean. They did not simply overcome the tradition of multiple households hinged on bride patrilocality that continues to be the norm in some Moroccan areas, but also clearly embraced the idea that their family life will continue at a distance:

He is from Casablanca, I am from Rabat, the administrative capital. How did we meet each other? There is a relationship between the families. He came when he was young, I saw him several times and then the proposal. Then his father and mother proposed to me, as happens for so many boys and girls, because we have that thing in our customs and habits, that families can, as it were, enter into marriage. Then the decision came back to me – it's just a proposal. And he talked to me, we talked many times and I saw that I liked him. And then it worked out. (Lubna)

Faatin, my wife, is related to my sister-in-law, who lives in the area here in [...], my brother's wife, they are related, although a bit distantly, let's say second degree, and through that family of my sister-in-law, I got to know this family, I used to visit them often... [Faatin follows the story, chuckling]. It didn't come about [spontaneously]... I mean, with us there is always, not really a "séparé", but our way of getting to know a girl is not how other people think of [doing] it, that there is freedom to talk to or date a girl or to go out, absolutely not. We both grew up in very traditional families. [...] My mom at the time took an interest – as we say now, every mother is trying to get her children settled. The first one had already married, and now there was the second one, which would be yours truly. And from there it came about, slowly.... (Hassan)

These transnational family stories reveal a reversed circulation of care moving between places and generations: family and relatives, with the array of affective and social resources they mobilize, literally drive the relocation of spheres of intergenerational transmission outside the country of origin, thereby extending the scope of family reproduction. To a marked extent, parents play a pivotal role in this process by supporting individual life courses and the budding of new household formations.

In the end, analysing transnational households and care circulation through the lens of transnational marriage uncovers unexplored features of the way family solidarity and sense of belonging are maintained in circumstances of prolonged separation. First, as the collected stories reveal, families and relatives in the country of origin support migrants in their lives abroad, not just the other way around. Specifically, transnational conjugal agreements deployed from Morocco to Italy, and from parents to children, engender the circulation of social remittances (Levitt 1998) that are crucial for turning individual life courses into family projects; these circuits of care spread out from background local contexts, moving counter to the classical direction of migrants' economic remittances (Mazzucato 2011). Second, and most importantly, these processes make clear that a collective investment is being made to establish and improve family life overseas, so much so as to abandon the idea of returning. In fact, when care circulation is related to family formation processes across migration, it transforms the previous household arrangement, boundaries, and placement: the older generation is now committed to a vision of family life that encompasses the idea of the newly formed couples and their descendants making a home away from home. Finally, while the traditional perspective on care circulation focuses on understanding how migrants and their family maintain significant relationships at a distance, the transnational matching arena reconstructed thus far reveals how emplacement and closeness can be forged across migration. This means that transnational families not only deploy relationships destined to be kept at a distance, but also configure household living in proximity. Adopting this lens, we can see unity and separation, absence and presence, distance and proximity as complementary kaleidoscopic dimensions of the transnational household life cycle.

7. Conclusion: circulation of care and family reproduction in times of uncertain futures

Social reproduction, understood as array of practices and relationships that enact the perpetuation of life, is a process that is deployed through social change: it has never meant replicating an identical version of the past. This is especially true when considering how the family cycle intersects migration. Indeed, mobility and displacement are conditions that make particularly evident how individuals and their households adjust, adapt, and subvert their behaviours and patterns to deal with new conditions of survival and endurance. Conceived in terms of movements, flows, and multiple exchanges, transnationalism and the circulation of care have long represented the social articulations through which families are able to cope with extreme life occurrences caused by distance and absence (Baldassar et al. 2018; Kilkey et al. 2018). In this picture, the efforts of individuals and households to improve their lives through mobility are hindered but not defeated by restrictive migration policies and border enforcement. Migration continues to represent the horizon towards which individuals direct their projects, desires, and aspirations for a better life: myriad movements and communications sedimented over time ensure that transnationalism remains a highly significant structural feature of the way they envisage the future. So, rather than focusing on the limitations displayed by the circulation of care approach in the face of globally constrained (im)mobility, my analysis has focused on retracing further ways that individuals are nonetheless able to intertwine mobility and family life.

Transnational marriages, despite being widely debated in migration and family studies, have not yet been considered from this perspective, nor have studies addressed the theoretical challenge they represent. As I have argued, pointing to the systemic processes that these conjugal formations make possible across migration generates new avenues of research. Transnational marriages, in fact, contribute significantly to enhancing the ways families maintain relationships afar, delineating new shapes for distance and proximity in the complex patterns of family transnationalism. Specifically, as my analysis aimed to demonstrate, transnational marriages are to a great extent sponsored, supported and arranged through the direct involvement of families and relatives. Acting from the country of origin and along transnational kinship lines, these kin facilitate matchmaking and the formation of households to be set up abroad. This kind of caregiving is pivotal to the evolution of migrants' life courses, as it may make the difference in enabling individual trajectories of mobility to grow into family projects or not. By adopting these lenses, we can see that care circulates through transnational family networks as a collective engagement which broadens the space of intergenerational transmission by increasing migrants' chances of establishing their own spheres of care and family life across mobility. From this standpoint, transnational kinship relations, whether actual or fictive, can be recognized as a social capital through which migrants and their transnational kin may buffer or even counteract global processes of intimate dispossession and stratified reproduction (Ginsburg and Rapp 1991, 1995).

Rethinking care circulation in light of these processes – to reprise Baldassar and Merla's invitation – opens up new avenues of inquiry in the field of family transnationalism. It requires expanding our approach beyond merely mapping the ways people, communication, and goods forge and maintain connected places, individuals, and communities. In my view, indeed, a key aspect of the circulation of care through global family relationships is the way it enables individuals and households to reinvent the relationship between belonging, place and their future. What my fieldwork revealed is that, more than sustaining their original interpersonal relationships, the practices and networks through which individuals and families feed into care circuits actually foster and shape the formation of new family bonds, new households, and new generations. In a nutshell, among the Moroccan families I interviewed, care circulation nurtures the regeneration and reproduction of displaced populations.

Adopting this perspective, the reproductive and productive roles deployed by families at a distance represents a key area of analysis for understanding how care circuits are articulated and what social resources flow through them. On one side, the trajectories of migrant workers who leave their families behind spatially separate these roles – as was common for Moroccan migration in the past and is decisively predominant for large numbers of migrants nowadays. On the other, when life courses and family events (marriage, births, home-making, kinship obligations and rituals) are expected to intersect mobility, productive and reproductive roles are interwoven with each other across migration. While the care circulation approach has focused mainly on the first scenario, with my study I have tried to highlight the latter configuration. Specifically, by focusing on transnational marriages between Morocco and Italy, I emphasized how care circuits make it possible to draw on relationships, practices, know-how and values from the country of origin to seed reproductive chances abroad. I highlighted how this seeding can be recognized as a form of reverse social remittance that supports mobile subjects in continuing their lives and settling down with a family abroad. What ultimately emerges is a population dynamic, triggered by care circulation and family reproduction across migration, that *deborders* national boundaries.

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Data availability statement

Due to ethical considerations, interview transcripts cannot be provided. However, anonymized reports describing the participants' characteristics can be provided upon request.

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Information in German

Deutscher Titel

Entgrenzung familialer Reproduktion: Care-Zirkulation und transnationale Ehen zwischen Marokko und Italien

Zusammenfassung

Fragestellung: Der Artikel konzeptualisiert die Care-Zirkulation neu, indem er sie mit dem Begriff der sozialen Reproduktion verknüpft. Im Mittelpunkt stehen transnationale Ehen zwischen Marokko und Italien.

Hintergrund: Die Lebensrealitäten von Marokkanerinnen und Marokkanern in Italien sind durch transnationale, geschlechtsspezifische und intergenerationale Beziehungen geprägt, in denen Mobilität und familiäre Lebensentwürfe zunehmend ineinandergreifen. Die Ehe nimmt dabei eine zentrale Stellung ein, da sie Lebens- und Mobilitätsverläufe sowie die Gestaltung verwandtschaftlicher Netzwerke maßgeblich beeinflusst.

Methode: Die Analyse basiert auf 50 offenen, ausführlichen Interviews, die überwiegend mit Frauen aber auch mit Männern geführt wurden. Die meisten Interviews fanden in den Wohnungen der Teilnehmenden statt und waren in umfassendere soziale Begegnungen von mindestens zwei Stunden eingebettet. Die Feldforschung umfasste daher auch teilnehmende Beobachtungen und die systematische Anfertigung ethnografischer Feldnotizen.

Ergebnisse: Der Artikel zeichnet nach, wie Fürsorge über das Mittelmeer hinweg zirkuliert und dadurch transnationale Partnervermittlung ermöglicht. Die Ergebnisse verdeutlichen, dass Familienangehörige und Verwandte in den Herkunftsländern zur Erfüllung familialer Bedürfnisse von Migrantinnen und Migranten in den Zielländern beitragen. Fürsorge fließt somit nicht ausschließlich in die entgegengesetzte Richtung. Darüber hinaus wird gezeigt, dass familialer Transnationalismus nicht nur die Aufrechterhaltung von Beziehungen über räumliche Distanzen hinweg umfasst, sondern auch die Entstehung von Nahbeziehungen und Prozesse der lokalen Verankerung.

Schlussfolgerung: Die Untersuchung transnationaler Ehen aus der Perspektive der Zirkulation von Fürsorge eröffnet neue Zugänge zur Analyse familialer Reproduktion und der sozialen Vorstellungswelten, innerhalb derer sie entworfen und aufrechterhalten wird.

Schlagwörter: transnationale Ehen; Care-Zirkulation; soziale Reproduktion; Verwandtschaft; marokkanische Migration

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