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Family Issues. Difficulties in Migrant Family Life Exacerbated by the Pandemic

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Abstract

Most of the time, when we talk about the family, we think of the indigenous family, but what happens when the focus shifts to foreign families? Furthermore, in a time of pandemic, what repercussions and impacts have there been on foreign families? And have the interventions proposed by the government to deal with COVID-19 and to support families, taken foreign families into account? The issue is quite complex because it has to deal, on the one hand, with definitional problems related to the difficulties in identifying types of foreign families (Ambrosini, 2020b) present in Italy, and, on the other hand, with an analysis of the impact that the virus has had on family structures. Migrant families represent heterogeneous contexts where there is constant, dynamic interaction between structural dimensions, cultural aspects and subjective choices, and during the pandemic, these have become “families in the balance”, vulnerable actors, subjected to extreme marginality. There are many issues, such as the home, which, for example, has become a space/place where to spend one’s time and experiment with forms of smart working, but many of the homes where migrant families live are not organised to cope with the pandemic and often reflect a pronounced inequality. Moreover, one should remember that, in Italy in 2019, 65.5% (Istat, 2020) of foreigners were employed in the service sector. It is difficult to imagine activities in these sectors being carried out at a distance. This paper, taking its cue from the cognitive questions

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posed, will propose a reflection on the situation in Sicily with a focus on the city of Palermo.

Keywords: migrant families, social vulnerability, Palermo.

1. Introduction

The COVID-19 pandemic has profoundly transformed the lives of families, affecting their incomes, what they consume and their work, whilst increasing poverty and extending inequality, with important implications for people's health and wellbeing. To counteract the spread of the virus, governments imposed severe social distancing measures. The effects of these measures have entailed a radical disruption of habits and lifestyles and major repercussions on people's economic status.

Moreover, according to the data reported by ISTAT in its annual report (2020), this clearly emerges in Italy from the decline in the number of employed people, especially those on fixed-term contracts and the self-employed, and from the increase, also detected by third sector organisations, in the requests for food and economic support both by individuals and households.

During the lockdown, although the Italian government and the various political forces have addressed the difficulties faced by households in general, the situation seems to change when the focus shifts to migrant households.

When we talk about migrant families, we are referring to a very complex and heterogeneous institution that involves both the individual and the group, taking into account the motivations, choices and projects of each member, whilst preserving in the background the individual histories and culture of the country of origin. All this in a continuous interplay between private and public dimensions, between the dynamics of the host society and external processes.

Therefore, there are many questions that we might ask and which open themselves up to further examination, above all, following the pandemic: how did foreign families react to the changes imposed by the restrictions? What repercussions and impacts of the pandemic have there been on the latter? What changes have there been? What resources have they used to counteract the difficulties? Have the measures proposed by the Italian Government to tackle COVID-19 and support families, taken foreign families into account?

The exploratory analysis proposed in this article was developed within a theoretical framework based on qualitative research methodology. I shall be presenting the results of a focus conducted on migrant households in Palermo, from January to March 2021.

2. Theoretical background

Although migration today represents a fundamental field of research, the study of migrant families and family migration received far more attention among scholars and policy-makers at the end of the last century (Bonjour, Kraler, 2015; Kofman, 2004).

The literature and empirical research on the topic have addressed several aspects, also thanks to the use of different theoretical models, demonstrating that, due to the complexity of the topic itself, the study of the migrant family has not achieved its own autonomy.

Studies on the topic can be traced to four threads (Eggebo, Brekke, 2019): the first analyses the effects of regulations on migrant families (Bonizzoni, 2018; Kofman, 2018), and the relationships between family migration, politics and integration in the countries of arrival (Hernes, 2018; Schweitzer, 2015); the second thread studies cross-border marriages, transnational family life, and the influence that regulations exert on individuals (Charsley, Bolognani, 2019; Baldassar, Merla, 2014; Williams, 2010; Bryceson, Vuorela, 2002); the third explores marriage patterns and labour market participation (Banerjee, Phan 2014); the fourth can be traced to the relationship between gender and migration (Kofman, Saharso, Vacchelli, 2015; Anthias, Kontos, Morokvasic, 2013; Cannito, Scavarda, 2020).

The issues that will be proposed in this paper are part of studies on the relationship between family migration, politics and integration. Reference to migrant families implies thinking about the transformations that labour-based migration has undergone in Europe over the years, and considering the orientation of migration policies initially geared towards individual migration (understood and conceived, above all, as temporary), and then later towards family migration.

The arrival of migrants in Europe, up until the 1970s, responded to a need for labour and was interpreted from the perspective of temporariness and, above all, rotation of the workforce; the political aim was to discourage the idea of permanence by hoping that migrants would return to their country of origin. But it was foreseeable that individual migratory projects would be transformed over time into projects of permanence and settlement. As evidence of this, the last thirty to forty years have been characterised by the familiarisation of migratory flows.

Although it is easy to define the characteristics of a “foreign worker”, it is not so simple with regard to family migration, not only because of the different types of families but also because of the identifiable characteristics. In this regard, writing on European migration policies, Kofman et al. (2011) identified three basic types of family-related migration: 1. family reunification involving

family members separated by migration; 2. family migration as a unit (nuclear or other); 3. family formation, including migration by marriage, in which a migrant is joined in matrimony to a permanent or non-migrant to form a family.

The different family types identified in literature over the years depend, in particular, on the time of migration, i.e., before or after marriage and the birth of children. On this basis, the repercussions on family relationships and the process of integration into the host society change.

The tightening of migration policies since the mid-1980s, the control and planning of incoming flows of foreign workers, has led, on the one hand, to the growth of illegal immigration and, on the other, to the application of the family reunification mechanism. The reunited family is one that, following the mechanism of reunification, is reunited in the country of destination of the individual who had initiated the migration. In fact, over the last ten years, entry for family reasons has exceeded other motivations, leading to the triggering of increased migrant flows through family reunification (OECD, 2017).

The problems that emerge, in this case, are different and have specific elements and characteristics. If, on the one hand, the presence of migrant families raises awareness of their integration into the country, on the other hand, their presence fuels stereotypical images, for example, that families from non-Western countries are the expression of backwardness, of a patriarchal vision of the family and women, and are responsible for the formation of “ethnic communities” (Ambrosini, 2019). The phases through which family ties are consolidated outline the dynamics of the “three families” (*in*). The first family is born in the country of origin, in a shared social context. The second family faces the separation of one of its members who leaves for work. The third family is the one reunited in the new country. In the latter case, the protagonists have changed: not only the children, who have grown up, but also the spouses. Both have had to lead independent lives for years, and now find themselves taking on new tasks and developing skills they did not have before.

Thus, the characteristics, dynamics and difficulties of families and the relationships between them and their contexts change in relation to several variables. Among the former, legal status is certainly a central factor. Whether or not one belongs in a European Union country is relevant for the possibility of moving across state borders. On the other hand, the situation of non-EU immigrants is different and rather problematic. Having a residence permit, having to renew it, living with the uncertainty of renewal and, in some cases, not being able to renew it, sends one into a spiral of uncertainty and the risk of marginality, which inevitably has repercussions on family members in terms of security, inclusion and the creation of a future project. Another variable concerns gender, which gives rise to diversified dynamics of care and caring; the social class is another variable, which influences social mobility, along with

the age of the reunited members and cultural differences (Ambrosini, 2019). Whilst reunification is a stage of the migration project, in addition to the obstacles identified, relational difficulties may arise from having to live together in new ways, from adapting to different situations, from acquiring another culture. In addition, there may be economic difficulties and increased maintenance costs that affect not just one member but the whole reunited family.

Families born in the country of arrival present a different case. The choice of creating a family, in most cases, refers to the couple and, in this case, migration is an individualized path decided at a different moment from the idea of forming a family. Even if the decision to migrate conditions choices, behaviour and relations with the country of origin and with the new one, the elaboration of one's own experience is not geared towards the migration project but the creation of a family unit. Difficulties may arise, for example, in the choice of the educational model to be provided for one's children, in the planning of one's own migratory experience and the cultural heritage one wishes to impart. Problems can already arise during pregnancy and become more acute with the birth of the child, with the clash of the two cultural models, that of the family with the country of origin and that of the host country.

3. Research

The research activity, through the analysis of data and information, has aimed to provide a focus on the impact that the pandemic has had on migrant families, the vulnerability that this has caused and the mechanisms that have been activated to contain tensions and respond to new needs.

The drastic and worrying pandemic has not allowed us to single out a sample that would take into account the differences between families established in the new country and those reunited. Therefore, even though we are aware of the various problems related to the types of family, in this specific case, "reunited families" and "constituted families" in the host country were both taken into consideration. During the pandemic, these families have shared a condition of "suspension" that has become the expression of the unease and precariousness they have experienced.

The study was conducted in collaboration with the local community, whilst bearing in mind subjective aspects and the relationship between subjectivity and institutions. The methodological instrument chosen for the research was the semi-structured interview (Bichi, 2017). The research was divided into two phases. In the first, five interviews were conducted with representatives of Caritas and the private social organizations present, in particular, in the

historical centre of Palermo. The meetings with representatives of the third sector had the aim of obtaining an overall picture of the context and the main criticalities. During the pandemic, the initiatives carried out by associations, in favour of vulnerable people, were seen as rapid and effective, and, above all, as a response to both the lack of public governance as regards the needs of oft-forgotten people and the slowness in activating the bureaucratic machinery. Insufficient income or the impossibility for some families to access support measures, due to legal or administrative irregularities, probably related to homelessness, are recurrent issues. There are many reported cases of cohabitation and overcrowding, unlawful renting or squatting. The associations' interventions, with limited budgets and with funds coming mainly from private individuals, have focused on "well-being" and health, presenting an example of a welfare community that has been able not only to react to the emergency, but also to represent a new model of social action.

In the second phase, 15 life-stories were heard from foreign males, who had turned to the services for support of various kinds, each representing his own household, referred by organisations operating in the historic centre of the city of Palermo. The non-probability sampling was composed of 5 Bangladeshi, 4 Ghanaians, 3 Tunisians, 2 Moroccans and 1 Ivorian. All of them had made the choice to migrate and, after migration, reconstituted the couple with or without children, either through the reunification process or getting married in Sicily. Only the Moroccan migrant and the Ivorian got married in Palermo, both with compatriots. It was the women with children who followed their husbands (Gabrielli, Paterno, Terzera, 2016).

On average, reunification took place within six to seven years after migration. The timing of reunification and the intensity of the phenomenon varied, as evidenced by literature, in line with the first migration or the characteristics of the family. The presence or absence of children was a determining factor. When there were children, the reunification was quicker (for 7 of the interviewees), while when there were no children, the couple remained apart for longer.

The age of the interviewees was between 34 and 39. All of them live in rented accommodation of 2/3 rooms (plus services) and the conditions described are not optimal, not only in terms of size, but also in terms of the structural aspects of the buildings.

The choice of the life story as a methodological tool seemed the most suitable for dealing with the complexity of the subject in question. The narration is a non-standard form of questioning that can overcome possible resistance on the part of the interviewee. The life story was also chosen because it made it possible to explore projects, representations and personal opinions, and to analyse the processual evolution of the phenomena observed.

The interviewee, besides being a source of information, expresses, as a social actor, the social world of which he is a part.

Three conversational levels were identified:

1. own history;
2. description of work activity, home, children;
3. description of relationships within the household and relationships with the network: community, neighbourhood, friends, services.

The difficulties that arose in the empirical phase of the research were mainly related to the restrictions determined by the COVID-19 norms. Further difficulties were determined by refusal, justified by lack of time, fear and confidentiality. The duration of the interviews varied and they were carried out individually; following explicit requests on the part of the interviewees, for several of them it was not possible to use the digital medium. The interviews were conducted in different places, always respecting the rules, spacing and wearing masks.

The greatest efforts were made to create a friendly climate of mutual trust in a critical moment of uncertainty, with attention to the context of the interview, to the dynamics of relationships that were triggered during the interviews, and to non-verbal behaviour, which, in these situations, could well have enhanced the research, but was diminished or invalidated by the use of the mask.

4. From the life-stories...

The decision to migrate, although it always follows strong motivation, becomes a significant experience of transformation of one's own experience and has an impact on the identity of individuals and on the relationship with the country of origin and arrival. For everyone, migration is a personal choice and part of a project that implies a personal investment in improving one's own and "others'" living conditions and achieving greater economic well-being. The reasons for migrating are not reduced to a cost-benefit calculation, but to more complex evaluations involving the individual, the community of origin and family members in cases of reunification.

I came here because there are many work problems in Africa. I decided to come to Italy. I did a bit of everything. Italy seemed a mysterious place to me. I knew some friends who had come to Palermo and I joined them. The first period was really bad, I felt really lonely, a foreigner. Everyone was looking at me. Nothing bad ever happened to me. There were other Ghanaians. We met often and spent time together. A friend of mine got me a job with a lady. I am a cleaner. She is a good lady. Finding this job was very important because

I fit in, I went around the city and met other people and did other jobs. My mind was on my wife ... on my family (Ghana 01).

Migration is described as a traumatic event that, on the one hand, is aggravated by the thoughts of those who have been left behind, and, on the other hand, motivation is spiced up by the responsibility and the burden of being a caregiver and by the duty to provide care (at a distance) to one's family of origin, or newly-established family, especially through economic support.

We had difficulties, and in the end, I decided to come to Italy to improve the situation. As soon as it was possible, my wife and son came and we got together. It was difficult to stay away from each other all this time, not only for me, but also for my son, who didn't see me in his early years. My wife and I spoke to each other by phone. We waited to sort things out, being an immigrant is very complicated, especially with documents (Tunisia 03).

Nonetheless, separation and departure determine the breaking of a certain equilibrium and the search for a new one. The time of separation can also affect relations both between spouses and with one's children. The longed-for reunion, considered as a longed-for stage after the separation and the bureaucratic procedures, did not, in most cases, fulfil the desired expectations; it took time to rebuild bonds and overcome the problems connected to starting one's life again, experiencing linguistic, relational, behavioural and cultural difficulties.

At the beginning we had difficulties. My wife was afraid. She didn't know Italian; she didn't know her way around... Then, when she arrived, she thought she would find a better situation... our house is small... slowly, slowly, she got to know other people thanks to school and teachers... I do domestic cleaning; I go to three different families to clean their houses. In the future I would like to change jobs (Ghana 07).

The interviewees re-shaped their parental roles because they had to reckon with the expectations of family members, all those left behind in the country of origin and the host society. Moreover, the arrival of family members meant not only rethinking their roles, but also initiating strategies of interaction, mediation and social integration with the new context, in order to offer more opportunities to family members.

The social isolation, maintenance of traditions, relationships with compatriots, interactions with local people changed with the arrival of the family; the need for roots and interlocutors with other institutions increased, e.g., the school in the case of the presence of children, with regard to whom,

the fathers explained, migration was not a conscious choice, but was imposed. The children experienced the criticalities connected not only to age, but also to coming to terms with what they had left in the country of origin and what they found in the new one. The situation was described differently in the case of children born in Italy, who went to school in the new country. Also in this case, the difficulties were linked to other things, such as not knowing and dealing with the mechanisms of the school system.

The changes that the interviewee, as a migrant, faced together with the family with whom he had been reunited, were different. The migratory experience described was not positive, as difficulties in integration and loneliness were the main obstacles in relationships with others, along with homesickness. The choice of a new country was determined exclusively for economic and work reasons, which might justify the discomfort and unease of living in a context in which one is not accepted, often rejected and in some contexts excluded.

The transformation of the migratory project into a sedentary one had to reckon with reunification, but also with the dashed hopes of most of the interviewees to get a better job, adequate housing, the economic means to satisfy themselves and their family, in the hope of social advancement. Moreover, the presence of children already conditions the family unit because of the expectations towards them, which might change with regard to the original migration project. Therefore, childhood becomes a central consideration for the interviewees because it imposes the adoption of new working strategies, educational choices and future projects.

I came in 2006... My wife and I met here and we have two children. We live in a small rented house. My country is the Ivory Coast, but our life and the future for my children is here. They go to school, they are good... (Ivory Coast 06)

The individual feels foreign and estranged in a precarious situation and this situation has been amplified by the pandemic.

4.1 Description of work, home, children before and during the pandemic

The narrative is organized by the interviewees into two phases: one preceding COVID-19 and characterized by reunion or marriage, and the other marked by the pandemic and the loss of work, distance-learning for children, savings and economic hardship. During the pandemic, even in the case of migrants, the family was the only social context for its members and assumed an essential role, guaranteeing the continuity of certain activities (Carrà, Moscatelli, 2021). The spread of the COVID-19 pandemic has had negative

impacts on foreign families, amplifying inequalities, accentuating self-enclosure and increasing the social vulnerability of its members. For migrant families, “staying at home” has not been easy. The family has been forced to shut itself away, re-emerging as a “cell of social life” (Corposanto, Fotino, 2020: 9).

In the city of Palermo, but also throughout Italy, unstable and precarious social situations have multiplied as a result of the worsening conditions of the labour market, which have witnessed an increase in low-paid jobs, undeclared work and short-term contracts (Fellini, Guetto, 2019). Migrants have become “key workers” on whom Italians depend for essential services (health, care, cleaning, etc.). Domestic work and home care are the main working activities of the interviewees and confirm the concentration of foreigners in jobs that are labelled as “immigrant jobs” (Zanfrini, 2004; Anderson, 2004).

My wife and I were neighbours. We've known each other forever, we were neighbours. We were very poor. We started working when we were young to help the family. My mother's sister had already moved here and my wife said to come here to Palermo. My wife's sister sent us money. I left and then my wife came after six years with my daughter. We found a small house. I worked in the market when I was alone. I got up at three o'clock... Then I did cleaning and now I am a caregiver (Bangladesh 05).

In this way, foreigners have been carrying out activities that satisfy the demand for low-cost services, filling the employment gap in public services and balancing the division of labour between genders (Avola, Cortese, Palidda, 2005). Only in three cases were the respondents self-employed or worked in businesses run by compatriots. COVID-19 has had a devastating impact on the work-dimension of both spouses, leading to suspension and in some cases even dismissal. The sensation described was that of regressing into the first phase, that of arrival, returning to a situation of survival. The lack of guarantees, support and assistance have created fears for the maintenance of the family unit and fears in the interviewees about maintaining the family unit in the new country, as well as providing support for the country of origin.

Linked to economic concerns is the issue of sending money home. It is clear that there is further frustration at not being able to send economic support to the family of origin, knowing that the critical situations and malaise in the country of origin were sharply accentuated during the pandemic. The sending of remittances to the family of origin, as a social practice, has meanings for the interviewees that go beyond economic aspects, confirming that economic transactions are also social transactions, “social remittances” Ambrosini (2019), which have strengthened relationships and family networks. Also because of this, the social upheaval caused by the pandemic has generated in migrants the

need to receive information in order to make sense of what is happening. Social networks were perceived by family members, despite the bewilderment and uncertainty generated by the spread of fake news, as the best tools to satisfy this need, to maintain and preserve family, friendship and work networks, but also to express and share emotional states.

During the lockdown, central to the lives of the interviewees and others, was the home as a place and a context of relationships, as one of the dimensions of individual well-being and as a process experience (Boccagni, 2017; Boccagni, Brighenti, 2017). Its quality and adequacy in meeting personal and family needs are linked to the economic resources available (Toccaceli, 2021) and, for this reason, owning or not owning a house becomes an element in establishing social inequality, as does having access to adequate accommodation, without necessarily being its owner (Filandri, Semi, 2020). Poor housing conditions are linked to poverty and affect learning levels, especially in times of lockdown (Rocchi, 2020). In line with part of international Anglo-Saxon literature, the spatial structuring of social inequalities, again, takes into account both the location of housing and the social morphology in the local area (Lombardo, 2020).

The quality of the housing, but also its internal organisation, the type of building, the neighbourhood in which one lives are a reflection of the structure of inequality. Expenditure on care and purchases of non-durable goods are the main costs affecting household incomes and, consequently, become a source of impoverishment and stress for the actors concerned. Respondents' households were small and medium-sized rented dwellings, costing more than a quarter of family income.

There are many houses for rent here. I had difficulties, but... when I called and said "I saw this house, I'm interested...", many times they said "It's already occupied". They don't want foreigners inside. I found a house. There is only a bathroom and two rooms to sleep. The kitchen is small... but it's OK... we have a roof... (Tunisia 10).

Low-rent accommodation is to be found in the city's most desolate and least secure neighbourhoods. Moreover, it is always difficult to find landlords willing to rent their housing to specific foreigners, due to the absence of guarantees and because the latter are often considered unreliable because of the precarious economic conditions in which they find themselves. They complain of a housing market that is not characterised by quality or value for money, but by insufficiency and inadequacy. Under these conditions, living as a family in a context of restrictions was not easy, especially when economic concerns took precedence over all others, one was stuck in "the house", freedom of movement

was reduced, one had no personal space and misunderstandings between family members increased. Topics such as housing, its quality and size, location in the city areas, proximity to services or not, were useful elements in examining in depth other topics such as, for example, relations and knowledge of the various cities.

The home was described, despite its small size, as a place to meet and relate to friends or family during the pre-Covid period. During the pandemic period, it became a protective space in which to shut oneself away from external dangers, the seriousness of which was not immediately understood.

We stayed at home; it was difficult. At first, we didn't understand what had happened. We called our friends, the lady where I work, and they told us we had to stay at home and not go out. It was bad. Like when I arrived here in Palermo and slept in the street, but now there's my family, my children... And my house is small. We were all cramped at home (Morocco, 15).

The family members spent their time in the home, unable to go out and, even more serious, unable to experiment with smart working. They rethought the functions of space within the home and had to handle the repercussions of all this on the emotional dimension of the members forced to "stay at home". Briefly, references were made to critical situations and if one considers that homes, in general, are not arranged to cope with pandemics, then, in the specific case studied, the spaces inside the home were not organised to respond to individual needs. COVID-19, therefore, imposed re-organisation in all households and the time spent on this was not seen as an opportunity to be with children and wives, but as a source of stress due to financial insecurity and uncertainty regarding the future. Frustration and emotion were amplified when the level of discourse shifted to the children and not only to concern about possible contagion, but also to the difficulties linked to not being able to carry out a formative role; consequently, this implied not being able to help their children with their homework and, in some cases, not having adequate means to ensure a wi-fi connection for distance learning (Demaio, Di Lecce, 2021). In the latter case, educational institutions and associations often intervened, providing tablets on loan and/or connection cards.

4.2 Networks

The inventiveness of the family was often the outcome of family members urging each other to work out projects and strategies that might contribute to the family's daily life and enhance external institutional, social and economic ties. Migrant families have built up networks of interdependence and the resources linked to their circle of acquaintances and friends; on the other hand,

they have come to terms with risks dictated by the fewer opportunities offered by the networks in which they find themselves. The effectiveness of the networks, even in difficult situations, has been determined by the provision of basic needs such as requests for information and food support.

The role assumed over time by the networks has changed and it is also possible to identify three phases in this case. The first coincides with arrival, and is characterised by the strong need to fit into relational structures comprising one's compatriots and constituting the informal methods for looking for work and orientation in the new country.

When I arrived here there were many friends that I knew... now many have left for other countries. Every week we met. They helped me get a job with a lady. I'm a cleaner. A friend of mine even lent me the money to rent the house (Bangladesh 02).

The second is related to reunification. In this phase, the network has expanded to include neighbours and local residents with whom to interact at different levels. The presence of children and their attendance at school becomes central in establishing relationships and receiving information about the functioning of the system, homework and books, meeting with teachers and parties. In this case, women take a more prominent role in the stories.

Then my wife came with my son. We are all here. I was working and my wife also found a job with a lady. My son goes to school here, he has many friends here (Ghana 11).

The third phase constitutes the one during the pandemic period, which also includes the local indigenous people, whether they be employers or volunteers, educators from third sector organisations, or priests or shopkeepers in the neighbourhood. These new hubs help in acquiring information about services, administrative aspects and possible forms of assistance.

The network changes in relation to one's years of residence and the acquisition of experience and knowledge. As time goes by, the support of compatriots is supplemented by the intensification of relations with native inhabitants. In line with the Istat report (2018), in the initial phases, the being part of an ethnic group facilitated access to the labour market, which in most cases constituted domestic or care work. At the same time, any other changes, such as finding new employment and improvement in one's conditions, though remaining in the sphere of domestic work, were facilitated through acquaintance with local people.

Even during the pandemic period, the network played a key role in responding to the difficulties highlighted by respondents in not learning about, and accessing, the “Bonus spesa” assigned by municipalities, and following the implementation of the municipal solidarity funds provided by the “Cura Italia” and by the Prime Ministerial Decree of 28 March 2020. Fragility is one of the elements that emerges transversally in all the stories and becomes an expression of a feeling of cultural and educational poverty that has made it extremely difficult for the individual to orient himself and access the welfare system. Once again, the loneliness emerged of those who feel left out, on the margins, those who are not listened to, and those who have no voice in political decisions. Family policies have not been able to recognise and meet specific family needs. Institutions are described as distant, with cumbersome procedures and little interest in the migrant family that is not considered, according to the interviewees, as a resource that contributes to the country’s development. The common opinion is that the Government has delegated without caring. This action has increased inequality among those families lacking technological tools and skills for distance activities.

One day, a friend told me I could come here to Caritas and they would help me. There was solidarity. Italians understood that we were in difficulty. Our children are in difficulty. They didn’t go to school... I don’t have a connection at home. The school helped us. It gave us a tablet. There is solidarity here. When someone has a problem there is always a Palermitan, someone who helps you (Tunisia 12).

Me and my family were forced to stay at home. I didn’t work and they didn’t pay me ... Our house is small. I told the landlord that I couldn’t pay the rent. He understood... he helped me. The Italians also helped me. They gave me food, milk and biscuits for my children (Ghana 04).

Requests made to municipal services were facilitated by volunteers, without whom the interviewees would not have been able to access the support offered. In this case, the action of third sector organisations and language mediators was also central, with the forms and information material being translated into the different languages. The delays in understanding what was happening were blamed on the fact that the information was mainly transmitted and disseminated in the first phase in Italian. Frustration at not being able to adequately understand the Italian language and learn about administrative procedures also emerges. Dissatisfaction with the government’s actions inevitably has an effect on confidence and a less than positive view of the future for oneself and one’s family.

5. Concluding notes

The health emergency has not been the same for everyone. It has created gaps in families and amplified situations of inequality and fragility. Migrant families have strongly felt the weight of the total detachment from the institutions, the moment being aggravated not only by fear of the pandemic, but also by the suspension of work activities and the absence or lack of adequate technological tools for children's distance-learning activities.

The greatest difficulties were, and are, paying rent and having sufficient financial resources to maintain the minimum standards of living. The families of the migrants encountered had to face numerous difficulties that destabilised and amplified possible situations of conflict.

The picture that emerged is diversified and is made up of families who have had to undertake an excessive load of tasks and muddle through daily life in order to survive; families whose adults found themselves without work; families who found themselves excluded and marginalised because they lacked adequate technological tools, for example in their children's distance learning (Favaro, 2020). These are all situations that have the shared feeling of being "suspended" (Centro di Ateneo Studi e Ricerche sulla famiglia, 2020; Bramanti, Carrà, 2021), protagonists of strategies aimed, more often than not, at survival and overcoming difficulties in the midst of different situations and conditions.

These are often families with complex internal structures (Ambrosini, 2020a), who perceive the host society in different ways, which can range from indifference to attention, and whose behaviour, even towards services, may be one of trust or closure. Daily routines represented by habits, leisure time and relationships have undergone rapid transformations and imposed a reorientation of family patterns, as daily survival has come to terms with prolonged and forced co-existence. From the accounts, it appears that privacy was lacking and the tensions caused by living in houses that were not suitable for prolonged coexistence increased (Lombardo, Mauceri, 2020). COVID-19 has affected routines, but also social practices, impelling families to confront new changes and fears, also determined by the spread of the virus in the countries of origin.

The impossibility of leaving home and meeting up socially has also led families to shift meetings with friends and compatriots to virtual contexts (Rolland, 2020).

These families, in general, have shown a capacity to cope with difficulties and risks, but in the case of migrant families certain care and support relationships have been established, primarily with the neighbourhood, with whom they have shared discomforts and difficulties, but also with social services and third sector organisations.

A common element in this diverse universe is the need to readjust to different relationships, also reorganising oneself without the help of the original parental network, and to start socialising again, adopting the values of the local society, parental roles and styles of caring for and bringing up children. To this, as mentioned above, can be added the housing and economic hardships amplified during the pandemic. Inadequate housing situations and employment difficulties can become an explosive mix, i.e., a source of insecurity, fragility and precariousness, accentuated by the lack of guarantees in imagining an improvement in one's living conditions. The greatest difficulty experienced during this period has been the reduction in material resources being contingent on the economic sphere and linked to difficulties in accessing services, credit and wages. So, families are often worried, disoriented but committed to tackling difficulties.

In addition, the closure has made the families impervious to outside contact, not facilitating cultural exchange with the outside world, indeed reinforcing their own cultural diversity. This is a topic that deserves more research, in terms of the effects of the pandemic on family violence (News Wires, 2020; Cersosimo, Marra, 2020; Campbell, 2020), patriarchal oppression and gender inequalities in families with a migrant background. Maintaining social connectedness is a relevant strategy during periods of isolation (Usher et al., 2020), especially with reference to families such as these foreign families at risk of vulnerability, poverty and fragility. Lastly, the stories revealed the "loneliness" of those who feel abandoned, those who are forced, even against their own dignity, to turn to the services and, finally, those who do not believe in institutions and politics.

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