Work and Gender in the Context of Spatial Mobility and Migration: the Case of Highly Skilled Italians Abroad

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Abstract

Young, skilled and educated Italians have been emigrating in record numbers: About 160,000 Italians moved abroad in 2018 alone. While much of recent research focused on the economic drivers of this spatial mobility, this article explores highly skilled Italians' mobile life projects from a gender perspective. Our study was guided by the following research questions: How do mobility and migration intersect with gender relations and career success in the lives of highly skilled Italians living abroad? What role does gender play in highly skilled Italians' decisions about moving and staying abroad? Our research, which drew on semistructured in-depth interviews conducted with 51 university graduates, was part of a larger study of the determinants and trends in the new migration of the highly skilled from Tuscany, a region in Italy. Using Strauss and Corbin's three-stage coding process to analyze the interviews, we identified four core themes of particular concern to participants when comparing Italy with the contexts they encountered abroad: gender-sensitive culture in the workplace, strategic and dialogic mobile life projects, impact of state and workplace policies and (subjective) age vis-à-vis temporariness. Our results both confirmed the findings of previous studies and prompted new questions in need of further investigation, such as experiences of gender (in)equality and their power to transform short-term mobility into mobile life projects or permanent migration, dual-career couples' spatial mobility, and the impact of mobility on normative beliefs about key life events.

Keywords Gender · Spatial mobility · Gender-neutral workplace · Migration · Temporariness

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Introduction

In recent decades and in increasing numbers, young, highly educated Italians have moved abroad in search of opportunities for career progression and upward social mobility (Bartolini et al., 2017). As of 2020, almost three million Italians lived in a European country other than Italy (Statista, 2021), with approximately 182,000 university graduates having expatriated in 10 years (Istat, 2019). The drivers of this movement have been widely researched and discussed in migration scholarship: Commonly identified push factors include unemployment, economic recession and austerity in Southern Europe following the 2008 crisis (Bartolini et al., 2017; Breda, 2014); corruption, nepotism and lack of transparency in recruitment (Allesina, 2011; Ariu & Squicciarini, 2013; Morano Foadi, 2006); scarce opportunities for self-realization and professional recognition (Dubucs et al., 2017); and finally, Italy's low level of investment in research and development (Carrozza & Minucci, 2014; Saint-Blancat, 2019). 'The socioeconomic system in Italy does not reward adequately the young and educated,... who are often confined to unattractive careers, underpaid and unemployed' (Tintori & Romei, 2017, p. 2). As a result, Italians have emigrated in record numbers[1] (Romei, 2019), taking their skills and expertise abroad to escape from permanent *precarietà* (precariousness) and to achieve self-realization in meritocratic knowledge-based economies (Tirabassi & Del Pra, 2014). In the 1990s, this movement would have been categorized as settler or guest-working migration (King, 2002); however, with increased freedom of movement, new cross-border mobilities have emerged, gradually blurring the borders between temporary and permanent migration. There has been a considerable increase in temporary labour mobilities by EU citizens, particularly women (50% increase in 2004–2018 compared to the 25% increase for men in the same period) (Harslof & Zuev, 2022). Many young professionals, amongst them Italian nationals, now increasingly deploy complex mobility strategies—moving back and forth across and within (trans)national, social, and cultural spaces—in search of improved career prospects and employability.

Comparing Italy with other European countries using indicators such as gender equality, talent attractiveness and investment in research and development, helps understand the broader macro-context pertinent to the transnational mobility of young Italians. Italy ranks 14th in the European Union (EU) on the Gender Equality Index (European Institute for Gender Equality, 2022). Over the past years, it has consistently ranked last amongst all EU members states in the domain of work, which measures the extent to which men and women benefit from equal access to employment and good working conditions. In terms of talent attractiveness, that is, a country's capacity to retain and attract highly educated workers (those with master and doctoral degrees), Italy is amongst the least attractive countries of the Organisation for Economic Co-operation and Development (OECD) as per the organisation's Indicators of Talent Attractiveness (OECD, 2019). Finally, the country is also below the EU average in terms of research and development expenditure (% of GDP): in

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[1] About 160,000 Italians moved abroad in 2018, the largest number since 1981 and 3% more than the previous year (Romei, 2019).

2020, Italy reported 1.53% which was well below the EU average for the same year (2.31%) (World Bank, 2022).

Studies have also highlighted some additional drivers behind the recent outflow of young, skilled, well-educated people from Italy. Amongst these drivers, most notably, there are previous experiences of successful mobility (e.g. periods spent abroad studying or participating in staff exchange or traineeships under the Erasmus and Erasmus + programmes); escape from social pressures arising amongst others from gender-normative expectations; and greater commitment to gender equality and LGBTQ + rights abroad (Pastore & Tomei, 2018; Recchi, 2013; Tirabassi & Del Pra, 2014). Substantial evidence has shown that spatial mobility can be driven by and has an impact on gender relations (Vidal & Huinink, 2019) and vice versa; gender-sensitive cultures can act as a pull factor or a reason to remain abroad for women and LGBTQ + migrants engaging in international mobility (e.g. Kim &Yoon, 2017; Kostenius et al., 2021). Migration and mobility are also profoundly transformative experiences. Both involve a questioning of the self when faced with a new reality, including one's assumptions and beliefs. Thus, migration and mobility can pave the way for the (de)construction of new gender and family models (e.g. Schaer et al., 2017; Sondhi & King, 2017), and the ability to decouple oneself from social control and tradition (Harsløf & Zuev, 2022).

Research on gendered mobilities is extensive (e.g. Erel & Ryan, 2019; Harsløf & Zuev, 2022; Yeoh & Ramdas, 2014). And, there is also a growing body of literature which recognises the specific challenges and transformative potential attached to temporary transnational work experiences. Within this literature, the study of mobile (women) scientists/academics occupies a central position. As Nikunen and Lempiäinen (2020, 555) observes, there is an expectation for future academics—as well as highly skilled workers—to be 'mobile, international and entrepreneurial in order to boost competitiveness and global economic progress'. However, this has also created an environment where precarious work (e.g. short-term and zero hour contracts) is becoming the new norm. Based on their participatory research with female academics in the Irish context, O'Keefe and Courtois (2019) have shown that women often end up as precarious workers and 'non-citizens of academy', a status, which in their view, is evident in formal and informal domains (e.g. staff status, rights and entitlements, pay and valuing of work, decision-making) and reproduced through exploitative gendered practices. Courtois and O'Keefe (2015)have further shown how women in higher education are at a risk of getting stuck in a 'hamster wheel of precarity' with few chances of accessing secure work and career progression. Similar experiences have been documented by Bozzon et al. (2017) and Ivancheva et al. (2019) recently. Transnational labour mobility can both reinforce and offer a way out from this precarity. However, it often comes with costs, including reduced social networks, deteriorating intimate relationships and obstacles to combining work and family life (Nikunen & Lempiäinen, 2020).

Despite the extensive research efforts in recent years, important gaps remain in our knowledge and understanding of highly skilled individuals' (amongst them academics') spatial mobility and its complex entanglements with gender—at the level of identity, relationships, workplace arrangements or social structures. For instance, despite the vast body of research on high-skilled female migration (Ackers, 2004; Harsløf & Zuev,

2022; Iredale, 2005; Kofman, 2012, 2020; Nikunen & Lempiäinen, 2020; Morokvasic, 1984; Morokvasic et al., 2008; Pessar & Mahler, 2003; Ryan & Mulholland, 2014), little is known about the implications of career-led spatial mobility for childbearing decisions and (in)voluntary childlessness. Similarly, experiences of gender (in)equality in the workplace and their power to transform short-term (temporary) mobility into mobile life projects or permanent migration remain underresearched and poorly theorized. Decision-making in couples' spatial mobility (both same sex and heterosexual; e.g. Schaer et al., 2017), coping with diverging norms of masculinity (Crespi & Ruspini, 2015; Murgia & Poggio, 2011; Ruspini et al., 2011) and particularly, the role of transnational migrants in promoting gender equality and LGBTQ+ rights (Kenny & O'Donnel, 2016) are other research domains that have risen to prominence only relatively recently.

In this article, we aimed to expand the above discussed literature through an interview study conducted with highly skilled Italians in 2020–2021. Our goal was to answer the following research questions: How do mobility and migration intersect with gender relations and career success in the lives of highly skilled Italians living abroad? More specifically, what role does gender play in the decisions of highly skilled Italians to move, work and remain abroad? The article has been organized as follows: first, we describe research methods and offer an overview of the study participants' demographic characteristics and reasons for leaving Italy after successfully graduating from a Tuscan university. Subsequent sections present the results, focusing on the four key themes that emerged from our analysis: *gender-sensitive culture in the workplace*, *strategic and dialogic mobile life projects*, *impact of state and workplace policies* and (*subjective*) *age vis-à-vis temporariness*. The theoretical and research implications of the findings are considered in the discussion. The paper concludes with a discussion of the limitations and strengths of our study and directions for future research.

Methods

Participant Recruitment

This paper forms part of a larger study entitled Determinanti e Tendenze della Nuova Emigrazione Qualificata dalla Toscana [Determinants and Trends in New Highly Skilled Migration From Tuscany] conducted in 2020. Research participants were recruited using both a Google form circulated on social media (e.g. using Twitter announcements, the university's website and posts in Facebook groups dedicated to Italians abroad) and direct invitations sent via LinkedIn. To take part in the study, individuals had to meet the following criteria: (a) be an Italian citizen, (b) hold a university degree from a Tuscan university and (c) reside in a country other than Italy. A self-selecting sample of 51 individuals took part in the interviews. All participants were sent by email a consent form, which explained what was being asked of them and how their data would be processed and stored. All research activities involving access and privacy concerns were approved by the institutional review board of the researchers' university.[2]

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[2] For more information on the interview process, prompts and themes, prefer refer to the Supplement.

Interviews

Data were collected using semistructured, in-depth interviews. A total of 51 interviews were conducted in Italian, jointly by the first and second author. The interviews took place online between November 2020 and April 2021. They lasted on average 1 h and were recorded with the participants' consent. During the interviews, open-ended questions were asked to elicit information about the participants' background as well as expectations and experiences with study- and work-related mobility. The interview questions and prompts appear in the Supplement. Most interviews were held with individuals, but the study also included three conjoint interviews with couples, one of which was LGBTQ+. The original scope of the project was to explore the determinants of outward migration from Tuscany, and as part of this enquiry, participants were specifically prompted about gendered institutions, contexts and roles whenever gender emerged as a relevant aspect of participants' conceptualizations of mobility and workplace relations abroad. Instead of providing an overview of the overall study findings, we present a lateral reading of the collected interview data viewed through a gender lens.

Data Analysis

The interviews were transcribed in Italian by the authors. Instead of creating verbatim transcripts, the authors relied on systematic and reflexive interview reports as a transcription strategy (see Kalocsányiová & Shatnawi, 2022; Loubere, 2017). Prior to the analysis, direct identifiers such as names, place names and workplace information were removed from the data. The direct quotations included in this paper were translated into English by the first and third authors.

Data were coded using Strauss and Corbin's (1998) three-stage coding process (open, axial and selective coding). The open coding was done in Atlas. ti to cluster the interview data. Subsequent stages of coding were iterative and involved independent coding by the first and third authors, resolution of discrepancies by consensus or by the second author where consensus was not achieved and finally team meetings, in which any remaining inconsistencies were addressed and a collective understanding of the final coding framework was achieved. The authors also recorded detailed memos outlining broader themes, puzzling or surprising details and alternative interpretations of the data (see the Supplement for examples).

Results

Participants

The participants were graduates of four Tuscan universities: University of Pisa, University of Florence, University of Siena, and the University of Siena for Foreigners. Their main sociodemographic characteristics appear in Table 1.

Table 1 Sociodemographic characteristics of the participants

Age	Mean = 31 years (23–40 years)
Gender[a]	Female (37), male (14)
Education	
Degree	STEM (25) Non-STEM (26)
Specialization	Language, literature, and communication (8)
	Economics and business (7)
	Chemistry and pharmaceutical sciences (6)
	Biology, biotechnology, and biomedicine (6)
	Political science and international relations (5)
	Arts and education (5)
	Mathematics and physics (3)
	Agriculture, environmental science, and ecotoxicology (3)
	Engineering (2)
	Psychology (2)
	History and Philosophy (2)
	Tourism (1)
	Architecture and urban planning (1)
Country of residence	
United Kingdom (8), France (7), Belgium (6), Germany (5), Spain (4), Switzerland (4), Finland (3), US (3), China (2), Singapore (1), Australia (1), Netherlands (1), Portugal (1), Czech Republic (1), Luxembourg (1)	
Returnees to Italy (3)[c]	
Employment	
Sector	Academia (25) Public (5)[b] NGO (2) Private (19)
	Research: Post doc (13), PhD (10), MA student (2)
Length of stay abroad	
stay > 3 years (38); stay < 3 years (13); minimum: 1 year; maximum: 10 years	

[a]As declared by the participants

[b]Includes European institutions

[c]Data from returnees is not reported in this paper

Reasons for Leaving Italy

Many of the pull factors experienced by the participants in mobility mirrored well-documented push factors for emigration, including more educational and training opportunities abroad (especially with regard to doctoral and postdoctoral posts), paid internships, higher salaries and opportunities to advance their careers to permanent positions. The participants' responses did not appear to be influenced by gender in the sense that the primary reasons stated for moving abroad were very similar across the sample. Experiencing life abroad and learning new languages were common pull factors reported by the participants. These were not solely linked to prior experiences of international mobility, for instance through the Erasmus + programme or other

scholarship schemes but also to a genuine need (or desire) to experience new environments. The participants were appreciative of the knowledge gained at their home universities, yet they often opted to leave Italy to broaden their horizons, to seize the opportunities brought by the internationalization of higher education or to escape nepotism in certain cases. Others wanted to develop practical skills abroad (as compared to the strong theoretical knowledge accumulated in the Italian education system).

Thematic Categorization

As shown in Table 2, the codes generated from the interview data resulted in four themes reflecting the multiple intersections of spatial mobility with gender representations and relations:

  i. Gender-sensitive culture in the workplace: The presence of gender-sensitive culture in the workplace includes equal respect, equal pay, allowing more family time for all genders and creating opportunities for women and other gender minorities in sectors that have been traditionally dominated by men. Understanding the struggles that women face such as glass ceiling and leaky pipeline is also a part of this culture.
  ii. Strategic and dialogic mobile life projects: Through dialogue, both heterosexual and homosexual couples strive to find a consensus about whose career takes priority when opportunities abroad arise and/or how to strategically further the careers of both partners through spatial mobility, and the impact of these decisions on gender roles and expectations.
  iii. Impact of state and workplace policies: Gendered mobilities of highly skilled Italians are entangled in a wider context of employment, integration and (family) welfare policies in Italy and abroad. How these policies position men and women can support/hinder gender equality and thus impact on highly skilled workers' mobility choices.
  iv. (Subjective) age within the context of temporariness: Participants of all genders embraced temporariness as a core part of their lifestyle and thought about their future in terms of short(er) life projects. Their beliefs about age and the timing of major life events depended on the sociocultural context in which they found (imagined) themselves, with women possibly being more impacted than man by worries around temporary work and the postponement of major life transitions as a result of both precarity and spatial mobility.

We discuss each of the above themes in detail in the next section.

Gender-Sensitive Culture in the Workplace

Our analysis generated three subthemes and various associated codes delineating participants' perceptions of and experiences in the workplace culture abroad.

Table 2 Overview of codes and themes generated from the interview data

Open codes	Axial codes	Selective codes, themes
Women in upper echelons	↓ Gender stereotyping in jobs or career choice	Gender-sensitive culture in the workplace
Women in science (STEM)		
Opportunities in male-dominated fields		
Everyday sexism at work	↑ Gender egalitarian values in the workplace	
Female- or male-majority teams		
Autonomy		
Dropping out of (successful) careers	Remaining employed and on road to success	
Prestigious institutions		
Joint decision-making	Bargaining power	Strategic and dialogic mobile life projects
Whose career has the priority?		
Dual-career couples	Who moves for whom?	
Move for the sake of partner		
Delaying having children	Perception of gender roles and expectations	
Stigma and discrimination		
Alternative paths to parenthood		
Involved fathers		
Childcare options	Favourable family policies	Impact of state and workplace policies
Work–family balance		
Accommodating work environment		

Table 2 (continued)

Open codes	Axial codes	Selective codes, themes
Language courses	Active inclusion in the workforce	
Employment support to migrants		
Short-term projects	Temporariness	(Subjective) age within the context of temporariness
Feeling old or young depending on the sociocultural environment	Relativeness	
Lifecourse transitions		

Gender Stereotyping in Jobs and Career Choice

When describing their lives after leaving Italy, most participants concurred that more opportunities for women existed abroad in both traditionally male-dominated fields and science, including STEM subjects. Female respondents often perceived more opportunities for them abroad than in Italy. Although several factors were discussed in this connection (e.g. the superiority of financial, technological and administrative support mechanisms that create more opportunities abroad), gender affirmative action and mentoring were identified as essential for women's career progression and success in traditionally male-dominated jobs.

To emphasise the importance of mentoring, one of the research participants described the academic system as heartless, stating,

> Differences are apparent at the teacher and team leader levels . . . . You understand that it takes a different level of effort with pregnancy and childcare. The scientific field is heartless. The a tendency is to count only publications, so they [universities abroad] mentor women to deter them from quitting science.

In the Italian context, the lack of mentoring and support from superiors was perceived as one of the key barriers to career progression as well as a driver of work-related mobility. This was particularly true for female researchers in academia, who are still underrepresented in Italy as a result of decades of bias and unequal opportunities.

We also found a broad consensus amongst the research participants, both men and women, about the underrepresentation of women in the upper echelons of Italian organizations and higher education. Conversely, seeing women in positions of power or leadership was perceived as fairly common abroad. Melanie,[3] one of the participants currently residing in the Netherlands, suggested that her belief in gender equality had grown stronger witnessing examples abroad. She said:

> The Netherlands, I must say, is far ahead in equality. . . . The director of the center where I am—a biomedical center—has been a woman for the past year. She's the first woman; all the other directors have been men. I've never seen a case where a woman was the director, so she was the first. I think she will change things.

Other female participants also expressed an expectation for women in the upper echelons to change 'how the system works' and noted being inspired by strong and successful female leadership. For example, Katerina described working with a female manager as one of her most formative experiences:

> An all-female team was something my manager wanted and chose. She taught me many things. We had a great relationship of mutual esteem, [and] she was very good professionally. She had a *Devil Wears Prada* approach in the body of a 30-year-old girl, very young, very good at her job.

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[3] This and the names of all other participants are pseudonyms.

The importance of support amongst female colleagues as well as seeing examples of women who have succeeded in building a career in male-dominated sectors, often while raising a family, managing caring responsibilities, and taking on challenging leadership roles, was emphasized in several interviews.

Gender Egalitarian Values in the Workplace

When comparing the workplace cultures in their home country and abroad, one of the most frequently reported concerns was everyday sexism. This was particularly true for female interviewees who indicated that when abroad they did not have to face the certain gender stereotypes that often characterized Italian contexts. Overall, the participants described their current workplace as less sexist, more accepting of gender identities and more gender responsive. For instance, Carla, a PhD researcher in physics in Finland, noted that even though women were in a minority in her department, 'no man could say anything against gender equality, not even make a joke that undermined women because this would be awkward; furthermore, he would be criticized by colleagues'.

Similarly, Marla, an employee of an international organisation overseas, identified 'hierarchy and machismo', which she came to (re)experience in her encounter with Italian embassy staff, as a major deterrent to her return to Italy. So even though concerns of everyday sexism did not directly impact the initial choice of participants to leave Italy, later experiences of gender-inclusive workplaces likely contributed to their decision to remain and pursue a career abroad.

Furthermore, most interviewees, working both in academic research and the private sector, reported increased autonomy thanks to spatial mobility: More competitive salaries abroad allowed them to gain economic independence earlier than their peers in Italy, and they felt their career progression was not (or less often) hindered by sexism and gender discrimination. Those working in academia also felt that moving abroad helped them step out of the shadows of their professors, build self-confidence and gain recognition for their work. They often felt less 'lost', no longer under the name of the institution or the professor for whom they had previously worked while also able to express their individualism and exercise control over their career development.

At the same time, being both a foreigner and a woman in male-majority environments was perceived by many female interviewees as an isolating experience, amongst them Carla who 'had to force her way into the group' at her university. Gender (im)balance in the workplace mattered greatly to the research participants even though some like Katerina (see her quotation above) expressed a preference for all-female teams in industries dominated by men. Unfortunately, the interviews did not render sufficient data to draw comparisons between male and female research participants' perceptions of 'women-only' teams and targeted recruitment strategies.

Remaining Employed and on the Road to Success

Career, prestige and curriculum were recurrent topics in the data set with prestige being most often associated with working in English-speaking environments and countries. For

those in academia, holding a PhD or postdoctoral position at a globally known university in the UK or USA was seen as a strategic way for boosting one's future employability. Marco, a PhD researcher at Cambridge, explained the considerable care with which he had made plans for his near and distant future: 'The choice of America would be to, let's say, complete my curriculum at a prestigious institution, so when I come back to Italy, I'll have very strong credentials to present when putting myself forward as a candidate'.

Although many interviewees found life abroad overall fulfilling, for some the competitive environment, coupled with language difficulties and the uncertainty stemming from short-term contracts offered to mobile young people, took its toll. Several female interviewees recounted dropping out of PhD and postdoctoral positions or wishing to move to a different, more stable sector. Claire, a PhD researcher in Switzerland stated: 'A career in academia is not only funnel-shaped, but it's also not stable. You have to move and start all over again. It's very unstable, and I don't want to experience that'. Claire's experience highlights that for some careers, particularly in academic research, spatial mobility is one of the prerequisites of success. Not all participants, however, showed a willingness to constantly relocate from one place to another and 'sacrifice their lives to gain points on their CVs' (Luisa, PhD researcher in France). The majority of the interviewees, both male and female, agreed that there were certainly important downsides to pursuing employment through spatial mobility, and that there were hierarchies of mobility: some could choose where and when to move while others have been chasing opportunities wherever (geographically) they emerged. The women in our study seemed as (if not more) mobile than men; however, they were also more vocal about the multi-faceted obstacles they faced for proving their international potential, and thus remaining competitive in traditionally male-dominated jobs and securing career progression. Some of the female respondents were also ready to resist and forego mobility, or at least reduce its scope. For instance, Serena, who completed her PhD in the UK, turned down an offer at a prestigious research centre in the USA for a job in Switzerland to remain, in her words, 'close to the South'. The data in study could not speak to whether it was easier for men or women to resist spatial mobility and still succeed in the careers; however, in their accounts, the participants often referred to their employment/destination choices from a specific gender position, e.g. the position of a single woman, working mother or father, woman with a partner, which suggests an enactment of gendered strategies of career and mobility (Nikunen & Lempiäinen, 2020).

Strategic and Dialogic Mobile Life Projects

Strategic and dialogic mobile life projects constituted another overarching theme that emerged across the interviews. Three subthemes are discussed in this section: bargaining power, decision to move, and normative gender roles and expectations of family.

Bargaining Power

The participants' accounts repeatedly challenged the stereotype of male-dominated migration, in which men decide to migrate and their partners and families follow

them. Many participants described having equal bargaining power in decisions about the couple's (family's) relocating to a different city or country. Similarly, both the heterosexual and same-sex couples in the study emphasized the importance of being considerate of their partner's professional aspirations and recognized a strong 'geographical component' to couple decisions. Several instances occurred in heterosexual couples, where women's careers took priority, clearly challenging the stereotypical view of women as comovers in mobile life projects. Amongst the interviewees, several reported making their future career plans and mobility decisions jointly with their partner while striving for consensus instead of a compromise or one-sided sacrifice.

Who Moves for Whom?

The participants' motivations to follow their partners abroad can be grouped broadly in two categories: (a) moving for the sake of the partner and (b) dual-career couples. The former, moving for the sake of the partner, was reflected in the account of Martina, who was offered a 4-year contract in France following an internship:

> I am 33 years old and she [her partner] is 36, and we spent most of our time on planes. We discussed this at length. She had a job in Florence, so to have a family, one of us had to give up her place. I told her that I would support her if she were to stay with me here.

For other couples, the benefits of mobility for both partners were highlighted. For example, Giuliana explained her decision to follow her partner to France as an opportunity to fulfil her personal aspiration of working abroad:

> I worked in a pharmaceutical company for two years, and the plan was to go abroad anyway. . . . He had an opportunity to go to Paris, and it seemed like a great opportunity even though I didn't speak French. Working abroad was always a challenge that I wanted to take on.

For couples like Dario and Marianna, however, mobility was a key factor in both parties achieving professional success. A 'dual-career couple', they had left Italy after completing their PhDs and have lived abroad for almost 10 years, moving between various countries. Dario explained their latest move to Switzerland:

> I was trying to figure out what to do next. . . . Marianna was between contracts at the university and tried to work in a private company, but she didn't like it. She understood that she wanted to continue her research . . . . We thought that we had to or we could move again, following an opportunity of hers. We decided to come to Switzerland.

Dual-career opportunities were both a driver of mobility and a deterrent for returning to Italy, where dual careers are 'something rarely seen' or where academic researchers are forced to compete with their partners for the few available job openings at laboratories and research institutions in the country of return.

Perception of Gender Roles and Expectations

A focus on spatial and career mobility has also led some research participants to (re)consider and at times deviate from gender roles and expectations generally perceived as a norm in Italy. For some interviewees, this meant, for example, to delay or put on hold indefinitely plans to have children. Some respondents, such as Sandra (a postdoctoral researcher at Stanford University), framed this choice as a temporary 'sacrifice', which along with hard work would pay off for her in the long run; others like Lena, a highly skilled Italian migrant in Belgium, challenged the idea that having a family made sense for all. She saw it as incompatible with her then-life abroad. Yet others reported experiences of being disadvantaged in Italy based on potential or realized motherhood. For example, Theresa linked her experience of gender-based discrimination in hiring with a push for mobility: 'In Italy, I had two job interviews: One asked me to work for free. Another asked me whether I was engaged and whether I wanted to have children. I decided that I would do more job applications abroad'.

Alternative paths to motherhood were also considered by some of the female interviewees whose life trajectories were dictated by international professional mobility. For instance, Monica has considered egg freezing to safeguard her future options and to defuse the tension between being on the move and 'wanting to have a family one day'. Serena also faced difficulties in maintaining relationships and establishing a family of her own. She recounted: 'At times finding a partner or making a relationship work is not easy. This is a massive downside [to being mobile]'.

Overall, concerns about delayed parenthood because of migration were more common amongst the female participants in their mid-30 s than other respondents. Those who had partners but were not planning to marry or had not yet established a family, reported less sexuality-based microaggressions abroad as well as less stigma attached to gender nonconformity. Selena, a PhD researcher in the USA, described her workplace abroad as 'free of any gender stigma' unlike what she had seen back in Italy: 'It was tiring in Sicily. At least here they do not ask you stupid questions like 'Why are you lesbian?' Selena was also amongst the participants who actively engaged in discussions with friends and acquaintances back in Italy about measures to support gender parity. Migration and mobility have also exposed the research participants to a variety of cultures of parenting, especially fatherhood, in which men are more involved in their children's lives. For example, in Dario's experience, Italian supervisors, especially those who were childless, often expected him to work 12 h a day without considering his childcare responsibilities. This was true for his supervisor both in Italy and Switzerland (who was an Italian national). In contrast, his employment in the Netherlands allowed him to be an involved father while also progressing professionally. The interviews conducted with further male participants in the study also exposed some deeply entrenched ideas about gender roles within family, childcare and their impact on women's career prospects. For instance, Filippo, whose wife was pregnant at the time of the interview, said that she would likely drop out from her work because the competitiveness of it was 'incompatible with motherhood'. While he worked in the same sector and was sympathetic to her situation, he did not question at any point the (un)fairness of women leaving or

downshifting their careers because of caring responsibilities, even where it personally affected him, and he accepted this as a necessary evil.

Impact of State and Workplace Policies

Family-Friendly Policies

Study participants often found that state-level as well as workplace policies favoured working mothers (parents) and families more abroad than in Italy. This was reflected in statements about both superior childcare options and parental benefits abroad. The perceived advantages of becoming a parent abroad, especially in Scandinavian countries, were noted even by those interviewees who had not yet planned to establish a family. Another recurrent theme was work-life balance with some interviewees finding work obligations easier to reconcile with family life abroad than in Italy. In Marianna's view, having children was ultimately not seen as a career obstacle at her current workplace:

> The Netherlands is a paradise . . . . The family comes first, and if you have children, it is not a problem at all. Men and women are truly—maybe not equal but there is lot of attention [to gender equality]. . . . In the company those who have children are almost always on 80% contracts, and men and women take a day off each per week to stay at home.

Others recounted similar experiences also emphasizing how accommodating their workplaces were in terms of flexible work hours, maternity and paternity leave and extra resources to ease their workload. Overall, the participants also subscribed to the view that welfare provision abroad for families was superior to that available in their home country or region.

Active Inclusion in the Workforce

The interviewees, especially those working in Germany and France, highlighted the key role of state-sponsored language courses in their integration into society and the labour market. Transitioning from one sector to another was also easier abroad for some participants, especially those who accessed free upskilling and retraining courses as part of their workforce inclusion. Mobile women, both in our sample and more generally (see Nikunen & Lempiäinen, 2020; Harsløf & Zuev, 2022) face difficulties to remain employed in certain sectors, and thus having structures in place that support and allow them to transition to new areas of work can prevent the leaky pipeline. The female participants in our research, who reported having transitioned to different sectors more often than their partners and/or male colleagues, found the necessary support mechanism more readily available abroad, which further re-assured them in pursuing their careers outside of Italy.

(Subjective) Age Within the Context of Temporariness

Age and time constituted another common topic in the interviews. Thinking of the future in terms of short(er) life projects was one of the most salient consequences of spatial mobility. With their career advancement tied to mobility (and vice versa), the participants claimed to have learned how to live in the present and embrace temporariness as a core part of their lifestyle. At the same time, however, they also continuously examined and contrasted their life trajectories with that of their peers both home and abroad. This often translated into statements like the following:

'I would be of an age to start a family [in Italy]' (Loretta).
'A person of my age would have had a different life if she or he had remained in Italy' (Serena).
'We mature too late [in Italy]' (Lorena).
'I am becoming thirty and I am starting to think about a long-term relationship, but everything is quite uncertain at the moment' (Daniele).

Interestingly, subjective age, that is, how old or young the participants felt relative to their chronological age, very much depended on the sociocultural context in which they found (imagined) themselves. For example, Lorena, who considered herself ahead of her peers in Tuscany in terms of career success and autonomy, felt out of place in Luxembourg:

I suffered a moral blow at 28, still dressing like a girl and seeing women in their 20s dressed smartly and earning respectable salaries. I thought they were already adults, and I felt out of place. My male colleagues at 25 had families and five children [while] I was acting like a kid, going out for a beer in the evenings.

Completing major life transitions (e.g. growing financially independent or becoming a parent, a homeowner or a permanent employee) was from some participants' perspectives conditioned by spatial mobility because circumstances abroad were often either more favourable to reconciling career objectives with other life projects or allowed people time to transition at their own pace (instead of having to adhere to normative beliefs based often on age and gender stereotyping). In some other cases, spatial mobility and a search for better careers entailed postponing family life in favour of well-being, ideal work places and advanced careers that perpetuate socioeconomic stability and self-confidence. Finding economic stability and building self-confidence were key for the women in our study to feel ready to start a family and/or settle with a partner. At the same time, many of them reported being caught up in temporary (uncertain) works and short-term life projects tied to spatial mobility, which often led them thinking that 'time was passing too fast' and they might have already missed out on important life course events, because they could not commit to a place or a person long term. Although to a lesser degree, but the men in our sample also examined and drew parallels between their life trajectories and 'what was expected', thinking about what they could and/or should be already doing at their age. In this sense, all interviewees were quite reflective about where

they stand in life, while at the same time, most of them had no clear plan about which country to go next or what comes after their present contract, (post)doctoral journey or interest in the current job comes to an end.

Discussion

In this study, we set out to investigate how mobility intersected with gender relations and career success in the lives of highly skilled Italian nationals abroad. Four themes, which represented areas of particular concern for the participants, emerged from our analysis: *gender-sensitive culture in the workplace*, *strategic and dialogic mobile life projects*, *impact of state and workplace policies* and (*subjective*) *age vis-à-vis temporariness*. With respect to our research question (the role of gender in highly skilled Italians' mobility decisions), the results show that participants' choices to stay in a country were largely influenced by experiences of gender (in) equality in the workplace. Italian workplaces as well as social circles have often been described by the participants as lacking gender-sensitivity as well as offering fewer possibilities for women to advance professionally, particularly in STEM fields. Although sexism and lack of gender equality were not reported as a reason for moving abroad, experiences of gender-inclusive workplaces and family-friendly work arrangements (Buchanan et al., 2013; Gascoigne et al., 2015) outside Italy appeared to have influenced the decisions of many interviewees to remain abroad.

The participants' stated reasons for leaving Tuscany mirrored well-documented push factors (Favell, 2011; Morano Foadi, 2006; Pastore & Tomei, 2019; Tirabassi & del Pra, 2014, 2017; Tomei, 2017), amongst them a perceived imbalance between personal efforts and the attainment of desired outcomes, notably professional recognition and self-realization. Working extended hours seemed to be part of most organizations' work culture both in Italy and abroad (particularly for those employed in academic research), yet in the participants' views, meritocratic systems abroad made the sacrifice worth it. The main differences reported in this connection included competitive salaries, personal and career growth and access to prestigious institutions (outlets), which predominantly tilted the balance in favour of mobile life projects instead of staying in or returning to Italy. Even where return was a long-term goal, it was usually tied to the idea of upward career mobility; that is, the participants would return (regardless of gender) once they had built a strong CV and accumulated relevant work experience also valued in Italy.

The interviewees also reported having experienced fewer gender- or sexuality-based microaggressions abroad, which again might have played a role in their decisions to postpone—perhaps indefinitely—their return to Italy. The research participants' decisions to remain abroad were often also shaped by state policies regulating employment and workplace policies, integration and family support, which were deemed more favourable to women and gender minorities abroad than in Italy, particularly with respect to gender equality and women's successful participation and transitioning through different life stages and sectors of the workforce. These findings are consistent with those of others, who also concluded that young Italians showed a preference for living in societies where 'meritocracy prevails over

clientelism, and where the signs of sexism, racism and homophobia are less evident than in Italy' (Marchetti et al., 2021, p. 8; see also Pastore & Tomei, 2019; Recchi, 2013; Tirabassi & del Pra, 2014) for investigations into the relationship amongst discrimination, stigma and migration. In short, our results suggest that even where the initial choice to pursue a career abroad was made independently of gender considerations, experiences of a gender-sensitive culture in the workplace, and more broadly in society as a whole, has the power to transform short-term mobility into mobile life projects or permanent migration.

With respect to the second, broader focus of this article (the intersection of mobility and migration with gender relations and career success in the lives of highly skilled Italians), the accounts of study participants repeatedly challenged the stereotype of male-dominated migration and the stereotype of women as comovers or tied movers (Bailey & Mulder, 2017). Our findings thus add to and expand an extensive body of research on high-skilled female migration (Ackers, 2004; Iredale, 2005; Kofman, 2012, 2020; Metz-Göckel et al., 2008; Morokvasic, 1984; Pessar & Mahler, 2003; Ryan & Mulholland, 2014) by exploring for instance power and decision making in dual-career couples' spatial mobility. Our results offer examples of primary-tied movers as well as strategic and dialogic life projects that are not based on sacrifices but on consensus, dialogue and a mutual wish to support the other's career. Although we recognize that gender inequalities are likely to occur in couples' migration or mobility (Vidal & Huinink, 2019), our results imply a caveat to assuming that an imbalance of power (career priorities) or a gender struggle (Schaer et al., 2017) would always arise.

The findings of this study were less clear in relation to spatial mobility and its impact on other highly gendered phenomenon, parenthood. Overall, most of the participants subscribed to the view that family-friendly and flexible working rights and childcare provision as well as broader welfare systems were superior abroad (as compared to Italy). For some interviewees, living abroad created the necessary circumstances in which they felt confident to have a family without having to drop out of successful careers or endangering their career path or both. A perilous economy has left many women in Italy having to choose between motherhood or employment (Johnson, 2020): Spatial mobility offered a way out for some. By contrast, other study participants—many of them women in their mid-30 s—recounted difficulties in reconciling their mobile lives with their aspirations for motherhood, considering this as one of the principal downsides to heightened spatial mobility (see Brannen & Nielsen, 2002). Concerns about delayed parenthood were more prominent in the responses of female participants than men or couples. Cross-border migration and mobility also exposed the participants to different cultures of parenting, especially fatherhood, allowing some of the male participants to become more involved in their children's lives (Crespi & Ruspini, 2015).

Participants' movement within and across various sociocultural milieus also challenged their perceptions of the (right) timing and sequencing of major life events. This was reflected amongst other points in the frequent comparisons drawn by the interviewees between their current lives and the lives they would have led had they remained in Tuscany or moved elsewhere. Interestingly, how old or young the participants felt relative to their chronological age very much depended on their gender

and the event, career achievement, and sociocultural context(s) they used as a point of reference in their reflections. The Italian context was generally described as more 'protective and protected' compared to the risks and surprises encountered by the participants while working abroad. At the same time, pursuing a career abroad and experiencing day-to-day (work) life in new sociocultural milieus not only increased the interviewees' independence (from their families and former universities) but also transformed their attitudes and expectations with regard to workplace cultures, gender inclusivity and major life events and transitions. Normative beliefs about the timing of the latest point at which to expect certain events (e.g. parenthood, permanent employment, home ownership) to happen, are deeply entrenched in both individuals and the society. This article provides a first glimpse at some of the potential impacts of work-related spatial mobility on these beliefs, but more research is needed to understand and draw more general conclusions about this complex phenomenon and its intersections with gender.

Conclusions

Overall, the participants in this study described the work contexts encountered abroad in opposition to what they had experienced in Italy. Many seemed to have subscribed to the view that greater attention was paid abroad to both gender equality and the tackling of processes that potentially produced inequalities in the workforce. Another key aspect that was highlighted in the interviews was the reconciliation of professional and personal lives, which many of the participants found easier to achieve abroad. A sense of surprise was also reflected in many interviews as if the possibility of working in contexts that were better resourced, both economically and socially (in terms of welfare states, for example), represented a rupture with what had been learned and experienced previously. This may partially explain the participants' black-and-white representations of the differences between what was experienced in Italy and what was encountered along their mobility paths.

This point is related to one of the major limitations of this study: At the time of the interviews, most of the participants had spent a relatively short period of time in one place, also relocating between several countries; in other words, few of them had stayed in a new context beyond early postmigration phases, which are often characterized by positive emotions and the excitement of discovering new places (Cangià, 2017; Oberg, 1960). Our recruitment strategy—particularly the use of social media for locating participants and the reliance on a self-selecting sample—also meant that certain types of people were more likely to participate. This leads to a disproportionate ratio of male and female respondents, which may have had an influence on the salience of certain themes and topics. Similarly, given this imbalance in the study sample, it was impossible for us to draw direct comparisons between the responses of male vs. female respondents and heterosexual vs. LGBTQ individuals. Around half of the sample also reported being employed in academic research, which makes the findings less representative of the general population of highly skilled Italians living abroad. Similarly, the study recruited university graduates from one geographical region (Tuscany) alone: Given the considerable differences between Italian regions in terms of their

contributions to cross-border and international mobility, comparative data would have been beneficial to better contextualize the findings. Finally, our sample did not include Italians living in developing/emerging upper–middle-income economies (e.g., Argentina), which may have also affected the research results and conclusions, particularly in connection to the reported experiences of gender (in)equality and the reconciliation of professional and personal lives abroad.

Despite these limitations, the study contributes to and expands the existing literature at three different levels. First, it confirms the findings of previous studies in relation to young Italians' reasons for leaving Italy and highlights the potential role of noneconomic drivers of migration, such as gender discrimination. Second and more broadly, this study clearly shows that even if the initial choice to pursue a career abroad was made independently of gender considerations, experiences of gender parity and inclusivity at the workplace, and in society more broadly, had the power to transform short-term mobility into mobile life projects or permanent migration. Third, this article also brings forward new questions in need of further investigation, such as gender (in)equality in dual-career couples' spatial mobility and the impact of mobility on normative beliefs about key life events and transitions.

Declarations

Conflict of Interest The authors declare no conflict of interest.

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