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# **Social Reproduction in Sicily's Agricultural Sector: Migration Status and Context of Reception**

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## **Abstract**

This article illuminates the social reproductive experiences of migrants labouring in Sicily's (Italy) greenhouses. Current global transformations in agricultural production are intersecting with longstanding local economic and social realities, as well as with the 2007 Global Financial Crisis and EU enlargement, to make migrants, male and female, indispensable to a sector resorting to intensified informality in pursuit of flexible and cheap workers. Understanding social reproductive experiences as configured by migrant status and context of reception, the article includes analysis of interview and observational data with two nationalities of migrants – Tunisians and Romanians – occupying different positions in Italy's migration regime. The article concludes that the harsh context of reception posed by labour market conditions, alongside a familialistic Italian welfare regime, largely precludes opportunities for proximate social reproduction for Tunisians and Romanians. In response, migrants develop transnational resilience strategies resting on cross-border actions combining market-, family-, community and State-based practices, to navigate the social reproductive challenges encountered. Such strategies, however, are less feasible for irregular migrants whose socio-legal position exposes them to the most exploitative working arrangements, denies them access to State welfare and renders them immobile. Moreover, for some regular migrants, such transnational resilience strategies are not their strategies of choice.

**Key words:** stratified social reproduction; context of reception; migrant agricultural workers; Southern Europe; transnational resilience strategies

## **Introduction**

The migrantization of Southern Europe's agricultural labour force has led to interest in the implications for working relations and conditions (Cole 2007; Hartman 2008; Kasimis et al. 2005; Mannon et al. 2012; Perrotta 2014). In this article, we contribute to that literature by focusing on what Fraser (2014) refers to as a 'hidden abode' of the capitalist production system – social reproduction. Despite increased academic interest in the social reproductive aspects of migrants' experiences, to date migrant agricultural workers have been researched almost exclusively as workers, even though the sector is undergoing feminization (Cole and Booth 2007; Mannon et al. 2012). This is an important limitation since to ignore social reproduction is to research migrants solely as factors of production and to contribute to obscuring the fact that 'capitalist production is not self-sustaining but free rides on social reproduction' (Fraser 2014: 70).

Drawing on the related concepts of civic stratification (Morris 2003) and stratified social reproduction (Colen 1995; Kraler 2010), social reproductive experiences are understood in this article as being configured in part by migrant status. The concept of civic stratification emphasises a hierarchy in the legal status of migrants with implications for differentiation in patterns of their rights and entitlements. The concept of stratified social reproduction highlights how embedded within patterns of civic stratification is a system of stratified rights around migrants' family entitlements with implications for how families socially reproduce themselves in the process of migration. Research (Bonizzoni 2015; Kilkey and Merla 2014) demonstrates, however, that migration status is not the only factor mediating social reproductive experiences, and in the current article we pay particular attention to the impact of the 'context of reception' (Portes and Rumbaut 2006). Scholarship has attended to a range of aspects of context, including labour markets, migrant networks and race / ethnic relations policies, to capture the role played by institutional structures in migrants' experiences of integration in the receiving society (Jaworsky et al. 2012). Focusing specifically on how migrants' configure family care, Kilkey and Merla (2014) highlight the importance of additional institutional arrangements relating to welfare, care and working-time. In this article, we focus on the labour market as the primary aspect of context, while also acknowledging the importance of the intersection between the labour market, welfare and care regime, as well as some secondary aspects stemming from the labour market, such as housing location and conditions.

The data informing the article come from an in-depth qualitative enquiry of migrant agricultural workers in the Ragusa area in the south-east of Sicily in Southern Italy. Ragusa constitutes Sicily's major area of agricultural production, and is quite typical of the sector in Southern Europe. The Ragusa area is characterized by the presence of greenhouses, owned by Sicilian farmers, both small/medium-sized and large-sized, producing fruits and vegetables for Italian and European supermarkets all year around. Formerly dependent on familial labour, today almost exclusively migrants work inside the greenhouses (Cole 2007; Cole and Booth 2007; Piro 2015). The article focuses on the two largest groups – Tunisians and Romanians – which, as Third Country Nationals (TCNs) and new European citizens respectively, occupy different positions in Italy's systems of civic stratification and stratified social reproduction. This difference is a useful analytical tool for illuminating the interactions between migration status and the context of reception.

The article is organised into five further sections. The first introduces the concept of social reproduction and the literature on the relationship between migration and social reproduction. The second outlines the characteristics of agricultural production in the Ragusa area. The third section explains the methods underpinning the research. The fourth focuses on migrant agricultural workers' social reproductive experiences, examining the interplay between socio-legal status and context of reception. The fifth and final section concludes the article.

### **Migration and Social Reproduction**

Social reproduction involves physical and socialization processes to ensure 'the creation and recreation of people as cultural and social, as well as physical human beings' (Glenn 1992: 4). The production and reproduction through the life-course of people as physical beings incorporates family building through relationship formation and procreation, and the ongoing care required in the maintenance of people on a daily basis (Kim and Kilkey 2016). Social reproduction also constitutes people as social and cultural beings, entailing 'socializing the young, building communities, producing and reproducing the shared meanings, affective dispositions and horizons of value that underpin social cooperation' (Fraser 2014: 61).

Scholarship reveals the ways migrants – including as care-workers, cleaners, nurses, handymen and brides – contribute to meeting the social reproductive needs of migrant-receiving societies (Yeates 2012). A growing body of literature also illuminates migrants' own social reproductive experiences (Kofman and Raghuram 2015). Much of this focuses on care-giving rather than

the broader set of activities captured by social reproduction, either examining migrants' transnational care experiences (Baldassar and Merla (eds), 2014) or less commonly, migrants' care-arrangements in the context of (partial) family reunification (Kilkey et al. 2013; Bonizzoni 2014; Doyle and Timonen 2010; Wall and José 2004; Dyer et al. 2011). Collectively, the literature highlights two dimensions. Firstly, in the global economic periphery, a combination of uneven development, economic crises, structural adjustment processes and political instability, produces a 'crisis of social reproduction', the relief of which is often a key motive for migration (Kofman and Raghuram 2015). Migration, in this sense can be understood as a transnational resilience strategy designed to reduce the deficit in the ability to reproduce one's household. Secondly, migration simultaneously may disrupt other aspects of social reproduction, as households become stretched across borders forming 'global households' (Douglass 2006) and 'transnational families' (Baldassar and Merla 2014), and/or become inserted in new contexts with different opportunities and constraints for the configuration of social reproduction.

Research indicates that the experience of both those dimensions is highly differentiated. Building on the concept of 'stratified reproduction' developed by Shellee Colen (1995) to capture inequalities in the social reproductive experiences of migrant West Indian childcare workers in New York vis-à-vis their white US-born employers, researchers have examined the role of migration policies in mediating the social reproductive choices and outcomes of migrants (Bonizzoni 2015; Fresnoza-Flot 2009; Menjívar 2012). Central here has been Lydia Morris' (2003) observation that migration management processes allocate differential rights and entitlements to different categories of migrants, resulting in a hierarchy of stratified rights - 'civic stratification'. Embedded within patterns of civic stratification for labour migrants is a hierarchy of family-related rights, concerning for example, the treatment of dependants. Moreover, as states seek to restrict entry to only those persons deemed to be economically useful (Oliveri 2012), managed migration processes are increasingly extended beyond labour migration to include family-related streams, such as marriage migration, family reunification and family visits (Block 2015). Migration policies, therefore, also produce systems of 'stratified reproduction' - hierarchies in 'the ability of migrant families to reconstitute their families during processes of migration' (Kraler 2010: 15; see also Bonizzoni 2012).

Such hierarchies are inflected with new forms of inequality, as well as pre-existing ones based on ethnicity, gender and class (Kraler 2010). In Europe, policy analysis emphasizes the

sharpening divisions in rights and entitlements between intra-EU migrants and TCNs (Bonizzoni 2015; Schweitzer 2015), and in respect of the latter, between regular and irregular migrants (Fresnoza-Flot 2009). Much of the empirical research on the lived experience of patterns of stratified social reproduction, however, focuses on TCNs. There is less research on EU migrants moving under EU Free Movement – (although see Kilkey et al. 2013; Lutz and Palenga-Möllnbeck 2012; Ryan 2011, for some exceptions) - even though enlargement and economic crisis have resulted in increasing numbers in recent years (Recchi 2015). For intra-EU migrants, at least since the ending of the transitional arrangements that accompanied the 2004 and 2007 enlargements, allowing existing EU Member States to manage the opening up of their labour markets to citizens of the new Member States, migration policies, such as those governing family reunification, will have little direct bearing on households' social reproductive experiences; rather, it is the context of reception that will have the greater impact.

Sicily's agricultural sector provides a particular context of reception for its predominantly migrant workforce. Previous studies of the migrantization of the agricultural sector in Sicily and other parts of Southern Europe focused on the labour relations and conditions created by the logic of its production system (Cole 2007; Hartman 2008; Kasimis et al. 2005; Perrotta 2014), but there is little or no research on the relations and conditions of social reproduction, even in situations where the workforce is predominantly female (e.g. Mannon et al. 2012).<sup>1,2</sup> The elision undoubtedly results from the fact that this sector until recently has been male dominated: while on the one hand, research on migrant men generally adopts an economic lens, engendering the treatment of men as non-relational and disembodied individual units of labour, on the other hand, research on migrants and social reproduction focuses predominantly on women, particularly those working in feminized sectors such as domestic and care work (Kilkey et al. 2013; Kofman and Raghuram 2015). It is important, however, that those dualisms in the research are unsettled: not only is Sicily's (and Southern Europe's) agricultural sector increasingly feminized, but the elision of social reproductive aspects of male migrants' lives obscures the diversity of male migrants' hopes and experiences too (Kilkey et al. 2013).

### **Agricultural Production in Sicily**

Understanding the relations and conditions of social reproduction for migrant agricultural workers in Sicily requires examination of the production system within which they are incorporated. This is a system that has been transformed during neo-liberal capitalism in the current globalization era. Below we document the development of certain global characteristics

of agricultural production, which have intersected with local economic and social realities in Sicily, as well as with broader global and international phenomena, including the 2007 Global Financial Crisis and EU enlargement. These processes have intensified the informalization of employment relations in the sector in Sicily, producing increasingly pejorative working conditions for its labour force, which is constituted more and more by migrant people, a rising number of whom are women.

### **Globalization and Agricultural Production**

Partly in response to the longstanding local reality of old production methods as a result of low levels of technological investments on the part of farmers, one of the most important current processes impacting the conditions and relations of agricultural production in Sicily, similar to the agricultural sector around the world, is the entrance of global corporations into the seed sector. Those corporations now own and control the seeds and the biodiversity, forcing farmers into seed dependency (Herring 2007; Shiva 2004; Urzi 2015). The seeds used today in several intensive agricultural areas of the world, including Sicily, are not renewable seeds (Shiva 2004). Furthermore, those corporations are breeding seeds that necessitate ‘chemicals—life herbicide resistant varieties’ (Shiva 2004: 721) because they are predisposed to more diseases and pests. The pesticides and herbicides are produced by the same corporations that produce the seeds, reinforcing farmers’ dependence. Seeds that are patented or covered by breeders’ rights cannot be freely saved or exchanged by farmers. Seed saving and seed exchange are considered ‘theft’ in intellectual property law (Harvey 2003). Thus, the cumulated seed heritage, once preserved by local farmers, is now ‘either being destroyed by the introduction of monocultures of non-renewable seeds or being hijacked by global corporations through patents and biopiracy’ (Shiva 2004: 719); processes Harvey (2003: 75) interprets as ‘wholly new mechanisms of accumulation by dispossession’ that impact populations reliant on the agricultural sector for their livelihood. Meanwhile, the costs of agricultural products are collapsing due to trade liberalization and its removal of price and import regulations. Policies encouraging farmers to organize in cooperatives or to aim for exports, in accordance with the recommendations of the World Trade Organization’s Agreement on Agriculture, simply redirect support away from farmers towards traders (Herring 2007; Shiva 2004; Urzi 2015).

Consequently, for Sicilian farmers the entire production process has become much less profitable, leading to the concentration of ownership in the hands of richer farmers that run their own packaging warehouses and deal directly with the large retail distributors and/or

supermarket chains (Cole 2007: 75). For those small- to medium-sized farmers that try to remain as independent producers by bringing their product to the local retail market, exploitation and corruption in the supply chain further erodes their profit margins (Piro 2015). High levels of indebtedness are endemic. Until the ‘credit crunch’ that followed the 2007 Global Financial Crisis, debts were mainly to banks, but with the withdrawal of credit by financial institutions, they have since spread to the suppliers of the seeds and chemicals, further exacerbating farmers’ dependence (Urzi 2015).

### **Migrantization**

Alongside debt, small- to medium-sized farmers in Sicily have become dependent on migrant labour (Cole and Booth 2007; Piro 2015). In the Ragusa area, an estimated 63 per cent<sup>3</sup> of the foreign population is engaged in agriculture, mainly working in its greenhouses. Tunisians and Romanians constitute its dominant migrant labour forces. Tunisians’ presence dates from the 1960s, and results from a combination of factors, including, the escalating growth of the greenhouse system, declining availability of local labour due to falling population and rising aspirations, the persistent labour intensity of the sector due to a lack of technological investment, a sustained crisis of social reproduction in Tunisia, geographical proximity and migrant networks (Cole 2007; Cole and Booth 2007; Cusumano 1976; Saitta and Sbraccia 2003). Tunisians, as TCNs, require a work permit, tied to a particular farmer, to be regularly resident in the territory. Permits are mostly seasonal, giving typically a nine-month period of stay after which workers are required to return home, with the right to apply for re-entry the following year. Longer work contracts, which award a maximum two-year period of residence, also exist, but are less common in the agricultural sector. Work permits are expensive to obtain, and illegality and corruption within the system are rife (Piro 2015). Irregularity of migration status, either through unauthorized entry or over-staying expiration of residence period, is common among Tunisians (Urzi 2015).

While Romanian migration to the region is also long established, it was Romania’s accession to the EU in 2007 that produced a significant increase in numbers. Italy imposed transitional arrangements on the 2007 accession countries – Romania and Bulgaria – denying full EU citizenship rights to these so-called ‘EU2’ nationals until January 2012. Between 2007 and 2012, however, Italy allowed Romanians and Bulgarians access to specific labour market sectors, including the agricultural sector (Ivan 2007), constituting this as a labour market niche for EU2 nationals, which given their pre-existing presence, Romanians more so than



Bulgarians occupied. Partly due to migrant networks, this situation has endured the extension of full EU citizenship rights to EU2 nationals (Urzi 2015). The increasing presence of Romanians in the greenhouses has not been without effect; local trade unions have highlighted an accompanying deterioration in pay and conditions in the sector (Urzi 2015). In contrast to Tunisians, Romanian workers, under EU Free Movement provisions, are not subject to migration control: they (and their family members) have unrestricted access to the territory and once resident, have equal treatment to Italian nationals in all fields, including employment and social welfare.

### **Feminization**

A striking feature of post-enlargement Romanian migration to Sicily is its feminization. By the end of 2012, the number of Romanian women resident in Sicily was 50 per cent higher than that of Romanian men; in contrast, the number of Tunisian women legally resident was half that of Tunisian men (Urzi 2015). Tunisian migration to Sicily is predominantly male-led, due to the dominance of a male breadwinner / female homemaker model in Tunisia (Bouchoucha 2013). Although the number of single Tunisian women migrating is increasing (ILO 2014), Tunisian women face strong cultural and social constraints to migrate, and they mainly leave through marriage and family reunion (Bouchoucha 2013). When in Sicily, while their key responsibility remains the domestic sphere, some Tunisian women take up work in agricultural production, but only alongside their husbands. In contrast, in Romania the active role of women in the labour market is an established social norm (Lokshin and Fong 2006), and the labour migration of Romanian women has been largely accepted, not least for its contribution to the national economy through remittances (Anghel 2013). Single Romanian women, as well as single mothers and unaccompanied wives, have become an active and growing presence in Sicily's agriculture sector. Research (Dolan 2005; Lastarria-Cornhiel 2008; Mannon et al. 2012) identifies a preference in the global agricultural export sector for young single women, many of whom are migrants. Farmers justify their preference for women with the argument that the products are delicate, requiring 'delicate' and 'dexterous' hands (Dolan 2005; Mannon et al. 2012). As Mannon et al. argue, however, in reality the preference for women is due mainly to women's lower wages and weaker attachment to labour markets, which make them an ideal source of cheap and flexible labour, prepared to work longer hours when necessary. In the case of Sicily, they enter a context of reception, however, characterized by a familialist care regime, in which the care of children is treated largely as a private family responsibility for Italians and

non-Italians alike: childcare services are therefore scarce and State support for children is provided mainly through cash transfers to families (Bonizzoni 2014).

### **Informalization and Labour Relations and Conditions**

The migrantization and feminization of Sicily's agricultural labour force are closely related to the increasing informalization of the sector that reflects a global trend in the growth of the informal economy (Schneider and Williams 2013). Sicily, in common with much of Southern Europe, has long had a large informal economy that includes undocumented work, and its agricultural sector has been no exception (Pugliese 1984). Its ever increasing informalization can be seen as a further strategy on the part of small- and medium-sized farmers to manage their falling profit margins, and as more generally is the case, migrants (Portes 1995) and (migrant) women (Standing 1999), have become the preferred workers for these types of employment arrangements (Perratta 2014; Piro 2015).

The widespread and deeply entrenched informal economy typical of this area means that a large pool of irregular migrants can remain and work unnoticed, as randomly-hired day-labourers, contributing to the reproduction of the informal economy (Urzi 2015; Piro 2015; Reyneri 2004). Indeed, the high number of irregular migrants is often seen as the cheapest solution to the demand for a casual, informal and flexible labour force (Oliveri 2012). Informal employment relations in the Ragusa area, however, are not restricted to irregular migrants. For regular migrants, operating alongside the formal work contract where law guarantees all payment and employment rights, is another system - the *ingaggio* (engagement). The *ingaggio* is not a full employment contract, but a form of collaboration with the farm based on the number of days worked. It operates by certifying employment for at least the minimum number of days of social security contributions (employer and employee) required for workers to become eligible for the unemployment compensation and family allowances introduced originally for Italian farm workers. Farmers often prefer the *ingaggio* over a formal work contract: it is a cheaper employment option since they only need to pay contributions for the minimum number of days required by social security rules. Moreover, it has fewer regulations attached to it, and so does not expose employers to the same penalties or labour disputes as formal work contracts. The documentation for the *ingaggio* is also easy to counterfeit by farmers not wanting to fully declare their productivity. In this context, there is a short supply of formal employment contracts, but workers accept the *ingaggio*, since if enough days are worked at least entitlement is gained to social welfare provisions. A particular attraction of family allowances is that they

are payable for children living both inside and outside Italy. Workers, however, are vulnerable to accepting lower wage rates as a trade-off against those welfare benefits, as well as to doing undeclared work once the threshold number of days for benefits has been satisfied. The fact that the *ingaggio* needs to be renewed with the employer annually means that there is a strong incentive for workers to accept the terms and conditions stipulated by the employer in order to be re-engaged.

Given that their status as EU citizens entitles them to reside in Sicily without a formal employment contract, the increased presence of Romanians is linked to a rise in the use of the *ingaggio* at the expense of formal work contracts. This implies fewer opportunities for Tunisians to enter the territory regularly, leading to increasing levels of illegal trade in work contracts – so called ‘fake contracts’ (Piro 2015) and increasing levels of irregularity in migration status (Urzi 2015). Both intensify the informalization of the sector and an accompanying deterioration in pay and conditions (Urzi 2015).

## **Methods**

The article draws on analysis of a sub-set of a large corpus of observational and interview data collected in the Ragusa area of Sicily in the first nine months of 2012. Observation was undertaken in two settings: at the mobile clinic of EMERGENCY NGO<sup>4</sup> where migrants (and sometimes Italians) received medical assistance, and at the immigration office of a trade union in the city of Vittoria. In each setting, key informants were recruited based on their potential to contribute knowledge relevant to the research and to help recruit interviewees; they were interviewed on an ongoing basis and observation took place around their work roles between two and three times per week over the nine months. A total of 50 face-to-face semi-structured interviews - 30 with migrant farm workers, ten with farm employers and ten with trade unionists – were also undertaken. The sample design for the migrant farm workers was a purposeful one, to include Romanians and Tunisians, regular and irregular migrants and women and men. Research participants were recruited through the non-probability snowball/opportunity sample method (Silverman 2010), a choice made because of the hidden character of the population under study (Pope et al. 2002) and the delicate nature of the topic (Murphy and Dingwall 2003).

The observation settings were critical for recruitment, providing the study’s sampling ‘tentative map’ (Blanken et al. 1992) and initiating referral chains for interviews. Moreover, the

EMERGENCY mobile clinic was crucial to access migrants living in remote areas of the countryside. While it had been anticipated that among the Tunisians irregular migrants would be 'hard to reach', relying heavily on the NGO and trade union immigration office to access participants, the final Tunisian sample was skewed towards those experiencing difficulties, who we can assume are more likely to be irregular than regular migrants. There was also a generalised desire on the part of irregular migrants to voice their experiences. This may have been related to migrant mobilisations against exploitation that had been occurring throughout Italy since 2010 (Oliveri 2012), including among agricultural workers in Southern Italy (Perrotta and Sacchetto 2014). In the end, it was the intersection of gender and country of origin that had more impact than legal status on recruitment. Specifically, it proved difficult to recruit Tunisian female farm workers, who, in contrast to their Romanian counterparts, were relatively invisible in the observation settings and wider public arenas. Only two Tunisian women, therefore, were recruited: one, a trade unionist referred through a key informant, the other, referred by the female trade unionist.

All research participants were informed and consented to take part in the study and to be observed and/or recorded. The majority of migrant interviewees, however, refused to sign the consent form. Therefore, extra time was spent at the beginning of each interview to obtain verbal consent, carefully explaining the study and participants' rights, including the right to refuse to participate and to withdraw at any time. In approaching interviewees through the trade union and EMERGENCY NGO, there was a risk that potential interviewees would feel pressurized to participate; care was taken, therefore, to explain the independence of the research project from those organisations, and to gain the informed consent of participants without the presence of key informants. Establishing the project's independence was also important since farm-owners were being interviewed. Guaranteeing confidentiality, therefore, became even more critical, as did avoiding interviewing farmers who, as far as could be ascertained, employed any of the migrant interviewees.

Interviews were conducted in different places around the research area, including a private room at the trade union office, by the side of the EMERGENCY coach in public places and in cafes. Only two interviews were undertaken in the homes of participants, and then only because they were women recommended by trusted informants and they were living in city-centre locations. Participants were offered the choice of being interviewed by the researcher in Italian or English, or being interviewed in Romanian or Arabic, with the researcher supported by a

NGO translator. All but two participants opted to be interviewed in Italian. The two exceptions were irregular Tunisian migrants: in one case the interview was conducted in English, the second language of the participant; in the other, an EMERGENCY worker translated from Arabic to Italian and vice versa. All the interviews were translated into English at the time of transcribing.

Data used in the article are derived from the transcriptions of the audio-recorded semi-structured interviews and from observation activities. Most of the transcriptions were carried out during the fieldwork, an operation that supported the discovery of emerging themes requiring further analysis (Silverman 2010). The transcription process produced a provisional list of topics. Subsequently, a preliminary thematic analysis of all the interview material and observations was undertaken. Thematic analysis can be described as the process of ‘identifying, analysing and reporting patterns (themes) within data’ (Braun and Clarke 2006: 79). During this process centrality was given to what participants said rather than how they said it (Bryman 2015). Consequently, transcripts and observation notes were analysed to find commonalities and differences in their detail, providing a starting point for a more elaborate interpretation. Finally, an overall map of the most important themes was elaborated.

### **Migrant Agricultural Workers’ Social Reproduction**

In the following, we draw on analysis of material from interviews with Romanian (twelve - six men and six women) and Tunisian (fourteen - twelve men and two women) agricultural workers and relevant observation material. The Romanian participants were mainly aged between 30 and 50. While the majority had arrived following Romania’s accession to the EU, some had arrived prior to that, including one as far back as 1996. The profile of the Tunisians was younger, with eight of the participants aged below 30. Most were irregular, having either arrived so, or become so due to a failure to leave the territory at the expiration of their residency permit based on a seasonal work contract. The Romanian and Tunisian interviewees included those unmarried and married without children, single mothers, married parents and divorced fathers. The vast majority of parents did not have their children living with them in Sicily; children rather, had remained in the country of origin. There were only three cases (two Tunisian and one Romanian) with all children in Sicily. In a further case, the children were split between country of origin (Romania) and Sicily.

While the sample revealed unique rationales for migrating, for all interviewees their migration constituted a transnational resilience strategy designed to cope with social reproductive challenges in the country of origin. Thus, a number of the young single Tunisian men were in Sicily as part of a family strategy to increase household income in the context of extreme economic hardship, frequently exacerbated by the death of a father. Alleviating household poverty was also a motive for migration for older Tunisian and Romanian parents. Silvia, for example, a single mother of two, arrived irregularly in 1996 from Romania because, in her own words, she could not see her children 'starve to death'. Other migrants, while facing less severe economic challenges in Tunisia and Romania, could not afford to establish a future family life there and had migrated to gather the money to 'get married', 'have children' and/or 'build a family home'. Securing their children's future through paying for education was a central motivating factor for parents' migration in still other cases.

In discussing their migration motives and subsequent experiences, the migrants drew on a 'dual frame of reference' (Waldinger and Lichter 2003), that is, judging conditions 'here' by the standards 'back home'. Within that frame the economic gradient figured strongly. For both Tunisians and Romanians, although to different degrees, their income in Sicily was significantly greater than it had been at home, especially for those workers with a formal work contract or an *ingaggio*, for whom social security provisions supplemented wages. The social reproductive challenges that had motivated their migration were, therefore, relieved to some extent. Aspects of the specific context of reception and/or their socio-legal status, however, frequently provoked new risks for social reproduction. It is to an examination of the impact of both factors on migrants' capacities and strategies around bearing, raising and socialising children, as well as creating and maintaining their households that the article now turns.

### **Physical Co-presence of Family Members: Opportunities and Constraints**

A significant cleavage exists between Tunisian and Romanian labour migrants in the formal rights each has to establish physical co-presence in Sicily with family members. As TCNs, Tunisian migrants require a minimum residency permit of twelve months to become eligible to sponsor family members (usually restricted to spouses and children under 18) to join them. The right is restricted, therefore, to workers with longer employment contracts, rendering agricultural workers, who are mostly on seasonal contracts, largely ineligible. In contrast, as EU citizens, Romanians working in Italy face no legal restrictions on their family unification

and the definition of the family is broader including the spouse, descendants under 21 and dependent ascendants.

Despite the restrictions, there are instances of family reunification among Tunisians working in Sicily's agricultural sector, although the rates are lower than for their co-nationals working in Sicily's main cities of Palermo and Catania (Cole 2007).<sup>5</sup> The evidence from the current study indicates that those Tunisian agricultural workers who are able to live proximate family lives have relatively privileged labour market positions. Miriam, Tunisian, followed her husband to Sicily. He is among the estimated five per cent of Tunisians and Algerians who rent land and run their own agricultural enterprises (Cole 2007). As 'worker-entrepreneurs' (Ramirez and Hondagneu-Sotelo 2009), Miriam and her husband can afford a house in a town centre within easy reach of school for their four children whom they can afford to raise with them in Sicily. Miriam works alongside her husband, and has the autonomy to structure her working hours to fit with domestic commitments:

I work only in the morning. Then, around 11.30am I go back home to prepare lunch. My husband arrives around 12.30pm and then we have lunch. I only work part-time because in the afternoon I look after the children and the house. [Miriam, Tunisian, 48, 1996 arrival through family reunification].

Miriam's ability to secure the financial and time resources to raise her children with her in Sicily is in contrast to Alina's experiences. Alina, Romanian, also followed her husband to Sicily with their three children when Romania joined the EU. Both she and her husband have always worked with an *ingaggio*, receiving the associated unemployment compensation and family allowance. A combined wage of 60 Euros a day, however, proved to be insufficient to raise three children in Sicily, and Alina utilised her transnational family networks, sending the oldest back to Romania to live with her sister-in-law, in order to cope with the hardships faced in the context of reception. This arrangement was not Alina's preferred one:

I must stay. I must stay another few years to let them [the youngest children] finish school and then we are going to see what we can do because forever like this is not possible for me. It is too difficult because my son is there and I am here with the other two and I feel too bad about it ... I go back every time the harvest season finishes for two months, but it is still too difficult every time to leave him. He is okay there but he wants to come here, but it is not possible for us. [Alina, Romanian, 36, 2007 arrival regularly].

Moreover, despite having negotiated one day off per week (Sunday), the heavy work inside the greenhouse left Alina ‘too tired’ for domestic and childrearing tasks. Indeed, she was first encountered in the waiting room of the Emergency mobile clinic. Alina was worried about her health because in the last year she had lost ten kilograms; the result of an exhausting ‘double day’ she believed.

The case of Marin and his wife, Romanian migrants who met in Sicily and had recently had a baby, indicates the challenge of family formation and childrearing in the context of low wages and the absence of paid maternity leave and childcare services:

My wife is not working at the moment because she is breastfeeding. With the money that I’m getting, first comes the baby, then the wife and for me there is nothing left ... We are trying to build a house there [Romania] but we are not sure how the work is going to be here, we are thinking that my wife could live there for six months a year while me, I’m working here ... I would like to avoid this but what can you do with 30 Euros a day? ... We need more money. [Marin, Romanian, 31, 2007 arrival regularly]

Most Tunisian and Romanian parents, however, did not even attempt to establish a proximate family life in Sicily. In practice, the majority of Tunisian male workers interviewed could not meet the legal conditions for family reunification since they had an irregular migration status. Regardless of formal status, though, there was a generalized feeling among both Tunisians and Romanians that the context of reception did not permit a physically co-present family life. Precarious working conditions were institutionalized through the *ingaggio*, which almost all of the Romanian participants tried and usually succeeded to obtain. While providing some legal protection and access to unemployment benefit and family allowance, it does not guarantee the same social security and juridical protection of a formal contract and needs to be renewed every new production season, leaving workers highly dependent on employers’ willingness to re-engage them. Workers felt they worked harder and longer to maximize the likelihood of employers’ renewing the *ingaggio*. The *ingaggio* also institutionalized low pay as daily wages could be repressed by the expectation of receipt of unemployment and family benefits. The combination of precarious work flow and low pay led most workers, Tunisian and Romanian, to conclude that it was impossible to economically sustain their families in Sicily, despite a preference, as in the case of Toufie – a Tunisian father of three - to have them close by:

I would never have thought that life could be so difficult. I thought that here there was plenty of work, that they were always paying you, that I could save some money to buy



a car, money for my children, money to take back to Tunisia to build another house. I was thinking like that but then when I arrived here it was different ... now my family is still in Tunisia. I cannot bring them here because there is not enough work and I cannot afford rent, bills and shopping here. [Toufie, Tunisian, 31, 2009 arrival regularly but became irregular].

To minimize their living expenses in Sicily some workers take 'live-on' jobs, staying in accommodation on the farm. The study heard reports of the variable quality of this accommodation, which ranged from holiday farm houses to, more commonly, shanty constructions with very low standards of hygiene and safety, and often no or poor facilities for cooking and washing of persons and clothes. Multiple occupancy of the accommodation was the norm, and the clear assumption underpinning provision by farm-owners was of individual workers unaccompanied by dependants. Moreover, 'living-on' implied location in a remote area, far from services such as schools and health care, and without public transport infrastructure to access them, rendering also the socialization of children a challenge. As has been found with live-in domestic and care work arrangements (Kontos 2013), 'live-on' farm jobs by creating multiple dependencies – including for wages, accommodation, food and transport - increased workers' vulnerability to exploitation, particularly in terms of pay and hours of work, further undermining the capacity for family life.

### **Transnational Social Reproduction: Opportunities and Constraints**

It is clear from the current study that most employers treated migrant agricultural workers, both male and female, and regardless of migrant status, as individual economic units of labour whose social reproductive responsibilities are assumed not to migrate with them. Scholarship on what have come to be known as 'transnational families' emphasizes the possibilities for achieving both the physical and socialization aspects of social reproduction through transnational practices such as remittances, visits and transnational communications (Baldassar and Merla 2014). That research also demonstrates, however, that transnational families are situated within specific regional, state and national borders and have uneven access to the material and social resources required to undertake social reproduction at a distance (Kilkey and Merla 2014). Moreover, research has found that a significant downside of transnational family life can be the loss of sustained physical contact with loved ones (Ambrosini 2014; Carling et al. 2012).

The current study found a similarly mixed pattern of transnational social reproductive experiences. Mustafa, in Sicily for 15 years and always with a regular migration status, had succeeded in maintaining a stable work position, with a regular work contract, periodic seasonal leave, unemployment compensation and family allowance; work conditions that allowed him to send regular remittances to sustain his wife and six children in Tunisia and to visit them regularly. Other Tunisians, while remitting, were immobilised because of an irregular migration status. They relied on virtual communication, which was restricted to calls and texts because of constrained access to the internet – they could not afford the hardware and/or their ‘live-on’ arrangements meant they could not easily visit internet cafes in the towns.

Some parents who had left young children behind perceived that the needs of their children were changing as they grew up rendering transnational arrangements that had once seemed appropriate no longer so:

I left her when she was 7 years old and now she is 15. This year she has started high school and I am still here ... I really would like to go back because there are too many years since I left my daughter with my mother; she is already a grown up girl and I think she now needs her mother with her in this moment ... but I have to see what job I can find there ... Otherwise, I am afraid, I have to come back here again but I don't want to. [Donna, Romanian, 42, 2004 arrival irregularly].

Wider societal norms around the appropriateness of distant parenting are also dynamic and influence individual assessments of the costs and benefits of transnational family arrangements. Among Romanians interviewed, and perhaps arising from recent negative media campaigns about the fate of ‘children left behind’ (Vdovii 2014), there was evidence of a generational divide with younger migrants less tolerant of raising their children at a distance, a fact that may impact future migration patterns. Michaela and her husband Flaviu, for instance, arrived in Sicily to save enough money to pay off their bank loans and get married. On achieving their goals they were ready to return and start their family-life. Avoiding leaving future children behind was central to their planning:

Now is the time to have a child and be able to stay at home and not work. We have always thought that you should not leave your child behind with a grandmother or with others ... my brother is already in this situation, like so many other Romanians that have got their children with their parents. But we want absolutely to avoid this because it is horrible for everyone. [Michalea, 23, 2007 arrival regularly].

## **Conclusion**

Beginning with the premise that a production system cannot exist without a social reproduction system (Truong 1996), this article sought to address a lacunae in our knowledge around the experiences of migrant agricultural workers in Sicily, an increasing share of whom are women. Implicated in the global transformation of agricultural production, and impacted by specific local economic and social realities, as well as the 2007 Global Financial Crisis, we argued that this is a sector resorting to increasing levels of informality, and seeking an ever more flexible and cheap workforce, in order to drive down production costs. We found that to work informally in our case-study area means to not take for granted any of the laws and regulations applying to formal employment: from working time to regular wage rates and schedule of payments, from sick leave to maternity leave, nothing can be assumed. It is a space where the employer can exercise power over numerous aspects of his employees' life, creating vulnerabilities for migrant workers. By focusing on the impact of such working conditions on migrants' capacities and strategies around social reproduction, we contribute important new insights to existing scholarship on Sicily's agricultural sector under the processes of globalization, migrantization and feminization, which will have relevance to the literature on agricultural production in Southern Europe more generally.

We found that the context of reception is one that largely precludes in situ social reproductive strategies for EU citizens and TCNs alike. Thus, formal rights to family reunification were largely unrealisable since for most of the migrants interviewed wage rates are insufficient for raising a family in Sicily, working time and working schedules are incompatible with other roles, and the social infrastructure, particularly care services and housing provision, is inadequate and inappropriate for the needs of families and dependants. How do migrants and their families manage this hard context of reception? The notion of transnational resilience strategies is helpful in explaining this. Used above to account for migrants' initial migration motives, our findings highlight that transnational resilience strategies also provide ongoing ways for navigating the challenges for social reproduction provoked by the context of reception. Resting on cross-border actions, transnational resilience strategies combine a range of practices including market-, family-, community and State-based, designed to secure familial and household social reproduction. We found that the delegation of childrearing to family members in the country of origin is one important element of such strategies. A more surprising and unique finding, however, is the role played by the Italian State and in particular Italian State welfare originally designed for Italian workers, in migrant agricultural workers' transnational resilience strategies. Thus, the provision of unemployment and family benefits, the latter even

for children living overseas, supplements a system of transnational social reproduction based on remittances gained from market work, and for those who are mobile, prolonged visits back home. In this way, the costs of social reproduction of Romanian and Tunisian migrants' families are also partly borne by the Italian State, to the advantage not only of the migrant workers and their families, but to employers, and ultimately the production system too.

In focusing on two migrant categories – Tunisians and Romanians - with different sets of rights and entitlements around work and family – the article also sought to examine the role of migration status as a stratifier of the opportunities and constraints for migrants' social reproduction. There is clear evidence that having a regular migration status or not is a significant factor contributing to migrants' experiences. In particular, irregular migrants' capacity for social reproduction was constrained by their dependence on the most informal working arrangements, associated lack of entitlement to welfare provisions and forced immobility. Keeping regularity in status constant, however, there is less evidence that the formal status of TCN versus new EU citizen is a significant cleavage contributing to migrants' lived experience of social reproduction. Rather, the labour market and wider welfare/care regime conditions migrants are incorporated within cut through socio-legal status, structuring regular migrants' choices and experiences of social reproduction in quite similar ways. This finding has important implications for future research and political advocacy in the field of migration and social reproduction, since it highlights the limits of a focus on formal migration status alone; rather, attention needs to be paid to how the legal framework around migration interacts with the economic and social conditions within which migrants are incorporated in order to more fully understand the opportunities and constraints migrants face for bearing, raising and socialising children, as well as creating and maintaining their households. To this end, future research should also include closer examination of cases of family reunification among migrant agricultural workers- Romanian and Tunisian - in the Ragusa area to develop understanding of migrants' 'in situ', not only transnational, resilience strategies. Future research also needs to do better to access so-called 'hard to reach' groups beyond the parameter of migrant status. Thus, while this study appears to have overcome widespread barriers to reaching irregular migrants, an important limitation was the small number of Tunisian women recruited. Understanding their experiences is important given their distinctive positioning at the intersection between labour migration and family reunification policies and the particular family model – male breadwinner / female homemaker – prevalent in Tunisia.

## Notes:

<sup>1</sup>Papadopoulos' (2006) study of shifting gender relations in the context of the migrantization of farm-labour in Greece considers impacts on Greek farm-women's social reproductive roles, but does not examine *migrants'* social reproduction.

<sup>2</sup>Mannon et al. (2012) show how Moroccan women's role as mothers constitutes them as the preferred temporary workforce for Huelva's (Spain) strawberry farms under its circular migration scheme because their mothering responsibilities in Morocco ensure their return home at the end of the season. How the women manage their social reproductive responsibilities when abroad, however, is not examined.

<sup>3</sup>For more information see dossier statistic immigrazione caritas/migrantes available at: [www.caritasragusa.it](http://www.caritasragusa.it).

<sup>4</sup>EMERGENCY is an Italian NGO, operating nationally and internationally, delivering medical care to vulnerable populations.

<sup>5</sup>Mass regularization programmes represent a key route through which those otherwise ineligible become eligible for family reunification. We are grateful to one of the peer reviewers for this observation.

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