



I-CLAIM

Improving the Living
and Labour Conditions
of Irregularised Migrant
Households in Europe

Women migrant workers with precarious legal status in the agricultural sector in Southern Italy.

Sector report

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Executive summary

This country report, developed within the framework of the I-CLAIM project, explores the living and working conditions of migrant women employed in the agricultural sector of southern Italy, with a specific focus on rural areas in the provinces of Naples and Caserta in the Campania region. Drawing on extensive ethnographic fieldwork carried out between February 2024 and April 2025, the report examines how legal precarity, undeclared work and gender-based exploitation intersect to shape the daily lives of these women.

Most of the participants, mainly from Ukraine, have experienced transitions between regular and irregular legal statuses, often finding themselves in a state of uncertainty and vulnerability that affects not only their employment, but also their living conditions. Agricultural work is mainly undeclared and underpaid. Even when workers have valid residence permits, their employment is often irregular or only partially declared. This grey zone of labour relations contributes to persistent irregular work and exploitation. Many women report low wages, strenuous work patterns and poor safety conditions, including exposure to aggressive chemicals and a lack of toilets. Gendered dynamics further exacerbate this situation: women typically face sexist attitudes and, in some cases, sexual harassment in workplaces. In this context, undocumented status drastically reduces bargaining power and increases vulnerability to abuse.

The report argues that this is ‘poor work’, which only just allows workers to meet the bare minimum standards for a dignified life. Despite working all week, many women struggle to pay their rent, buy groceries and cover their children's expenses. Their precarious legal status often hinders their access to benefits such as family allowances.

Beyond the workplace, many female farm workers face precarious housing conditions — substandard buildings in urban areas far from the fields where they work, with limited transport options. Even though they live in urban areas, the lack of public transport and connections – for example, in Mondragone the nearest train station is eight km. from the town centre – places these workers in a situation of spatial isolation and immobility.

The lack of public services and affordable childcare, combined with demanding work schedules and the absence of family networks, places a disproportionate burden on women, who are almost always solely responsible for care work at home. Many rely on informal childcare arrangements. The report highlights how language barriers, social isolation and discrimination based on their foreignness reinforce their marginalisation. Not only do time constraints prevent women from participating in trade union or community spaces, but a widespread sense of disillusionment also plays a role.

In this context, exploitation is not confined to the workplace, but extends to every area of daily life, influencing how these women live, move and interact with others. The report emphasises the invasive nature of exploitation, which extends beyond the workplace to encompass all areas of life, thereby compressing its essential spheres.

The report calls for a structural, intersectional and gender-sensitive response to irregularity and labour exploitation in agriculture. Addressing these challenges requires integrated action on migration policy, labour rights, housing, transport and welfare, as well as a shift away from emergency-driven interventions towards long-term, inclusive strategies that prioritise the rights and agency of migrant women.

1. Introduction

This report is part of the project “I-CLAIM: Improving the living and labour conditions of irregularised migrant households in Europe”. It aims to examine the living and working conditions of irregularised people, through a household and intersectional perspective, in six European countries (Finland, Germany, Italy, the Netherlands, Poland and the United Kingdom). I-CLAIM project approaches irregularity as a multi-dimensional continuum (Sigona & van Liempt 2024; Triandafyllidou & Bartolini 2020) that encompasses not only migrant people without a residence permit, but also those with precarious legal statuses. The latter includes individuals who legally reside in a country under temporary permits, yet live in constant fear of losing their status and, consequently, their right to stay. From this perspective, irregularity also extends to informal employment, such as undeclared work. The main objective is to examine the different forms of irregularity affecting migrant people – especially migrant workers – the factors that contribute to and intensify these conditions and their impact on the family dynamics of those involved.

Focusing on the agricultural sector and drawing on ethnographic research, this report investigates the living and working conditions of migrant women farmworkers in southern Italy, particularly in the agricultural areas of Campania region. This sectoral approach aims to examine not only the individual experiences of these workers, but also the structural factors and processes that produce, reproduce and sustain irregular or precarious legal statuses and exploitative conditions in industries such as agriculture which are characterised by informality and weak labour protections (Palumbo 2024; Corrado et al. 2018).

In recent years – particularly since the outbreak of the Covid-19 pandemic – there has been growing institutional and scholarly attention to the living and working conditions of migrant workers in Italy’s agricultural sector (see, among others, Corrado et al. 2018; Corrado & Caruso 2022). There is also a growing recognition that a gendered and intersectional approach is needed to better identify and understand patterns of exploitation in traditionally male-dominated sectors such as agriculture (see, for instance, Palumbo and Sciurba 2018; ActionAid 2022; Palumbo 2022; Giammarinaro 2022; Corrado et al. 2023). Far from adopting a victimising or sensationalist lens, these studies have – using Camille Schmoll’s (2020) words – “feminised the gaze” on this sector, drawing attention to the specific forms of exploitation and abuse that women workers, particularly migrant women, often encounter. This approach considers the interplay of factors that shape their situational vulnerabilities (Palumbo 2024) as well as their agency within broader power dynamics and relations.

This report aims to contribute to the debate by focusing on the living and working conditions of migrant women farmworkers employed in the agricultural areas of the provinces of Naples and Caserta. Several studies have examined employment and labour dynamics in the agricultural sector of the Campania region, including the rural areas discussed here (see, for example, Bruno 2018; Avallone 2021). However, research investigating these contexts and dynamics from a gender perspective is scant (see, for example, Staiano 2018). This report seeks to address this gap by paying special attention to gender and intersectionality, using the multifaceted concept of irregularity as a lens to explore the living and working conditions of migrant women farmworkers and their impact on their household relationships and situations. From this perspective, in addition to examining labour relations, this ethnographic study also explores how irregular and precarious legal statuses affect migrant women and their families’ access to housing, healthcare and other essential services.

The report consists of four sections. The first section outlines the national and local legal and policy context of migration and the labour market, with a particular focus on agriculture. The second section describes the ethnographic methodology, while the third presents the main findings, highlighting the types of irregularity present in the agricultural sector and their impact on the working and living conditions of migrant women, paying particular attention to gendered experiences and discrimination. The final section emphasises the pervasive nature of exploitation and the necessity for structural interventions.

2. Context

2.1. Estimates and recent developments in Italy's legal and policy framework on migration

According to IDOS (2024), at the end of 2023, 3.6 million non-EU citizens held a residence permit in Italy, a decrease of over 120,000 compared to the previous year. This was due to a combination of factors, such as citizenship acquisition, fewer arrivals from Ukraine and bureaucratic barriers to regularisation. Most temporary permits were issued for family (35.5%), work (26.2%), or protection-related reasons (28.2%), including 162,000 Ukrainians under temporary protection. The 2025 Fondazione ISMU report notes a decrease in irregular migrants to 321,000 in January 2024, mainly due to the 2020 regularisation scheme (ISMU 2025).

Over the past two decades, increasingly restrictive migration policies have narrowed legal pathways and contributed to the production of irregularity (Palumbo & Marchetti, 2024). Recent measures, such as Law Decree 20/2023 (also known as the “Cutro Decree”), have further restricted access to protection and increased deportation efforts. Meanwhile, interventions such as Decree-Law No. 37/2025 allow for the transfer of asylum seekers and irregular migrants to Albanian detention centres, reflecting policies of border externalisation.

With regard to the measures provided for Ukrainian refugees, Law Decree 202/2024 established that the temporary protection permits granted to those fleeing Ukraine may be renewed, upon request by the beneficiaries, until March 4, 2026. These permits may also be converted into residence permits for work purposes. These are positive measures that remain, however, confined to the realm of exception and do not translate into ordinary policies for all migrants seeking protection.

The entry routes for migrant workers from third countries are regulated by the annual Flows Decree (“Decreto Flussi”), which sets quotas for seasonal and non-seasonal workers and for self-employment. Although the number of quotas for both seasonal and non-seasonal workers has increased, especially since 2021, and there have been some recent reforms (such as Law Decree 20/2023), the Flows Decree system remains inefficient. It still involves lengthy, convoluted bureaucratic procedures based on long-distance matching of job demand and supply, hindering effective and transparent processes (Coresi, 2024; Chiaromonte & Federico, 2021). The system does not prevent fraudulent job offers or illegal practices in entry procedures, thereby contributing to irregularities (Palumbo and Marchetti, 2024; Coresi, 2024).

2.2. Migrant workers' subaltern inclusion in the national labour market and agricultural sector: between irregularity and exploitation

Recent data confirm that Italy's labour market is segmented along lines of gender, nationality, skin colour and legal status (IDOS 2024; ISMU 2025). Over 60% of migrant workers are in low-skilled, manual jobs – compared to 29.5% of Italians – and see little improvement over time (IDOS 2024). Migrant women, mostly employed in domestic and care work, are especially affected.

The share of migrant workers varies by sector: under 0.5% in public administration, up to 62.5% in domestic work and 18% in agriculture. Their average annual wage is 30.7% lower than that of Italians (IDOS 2024). In agriculture, migrant workers make up 17.7% of the workforce (Osservatorio Placido Rizzotto 2024), but irregular work remains widespread. An estimated 200,000 undeclared workers were employed in 2023, with an irregularity rate of 30% (Osservatorio Placido Rizzotto 2024).

Since the 1990s, agriculture has become a key entry point for migrant labour, often under undeclared conditions (Corrado & Caruso, 2022). At the same time, the agricultural sector has become increasingly dependent on a flexible, low-paid migrant workforce to cope with competitive pressures within the capitalistic agri-food system. The structural characteristics of this sector, such as seasonal/temporary contracts, weak labour rights protections and a high level of undeclared work, have been exacerbated by restrictive migration and labour policies (Corrado et al., 2018). This has increased the vulnerability of migrant farmworkers and made them more dependent on employers (Palumbo 2024).

The migrant labour force employed in Italy's agricultural sector comprises a variety of nationalities and legal statuses (Palumbo, 2024). These include undocumented migrants, EU citizens from Eastern Europe (primarily Romania and Bulgaria), and non-EU workers, including protection holders and asylum seekers. The significant presence of the latter, particularly following the so-called 'refugee crisis', has led some scholars to refer to the "refugeesation" of the sector (Dines & Rigo, 2015), reflecting the inadequacies of both regular labour migration channels and the national asylum reception system.

Most migrant agricultural workers endure long hours, low wages, harmful chemicals, extreme weather and poor housing (Corrado & Caruso 2022). Agriculture is one of the most exploitative sectors in Italy, including instances of trafficking (Altro Diritto 2024). An estimated 55,000 migrant women are at risk of exploitation (FLAI CGIL 2024), often facing overlapping gender-based violence and discrimination (Giammarinaro 2022; Palumbo 2025).

Since the adoption of Law 199/2016, several national interventions have been undertaken to address labour exploitation in agriculture (Palumbo 2024). Positive measures include, for instance, the joint intervention of labour inspectors and linguistic-cultural mediators from the International Organization for Migration (IOM), as well as the creation of "Integrated Social Hubs" (*Poli sociali integrati*) to respond to the needs of migrant workers who are victims or potential victims of exploitation. Despite positive interventions, most efforts have largely consisted of short-term, project-based interventions that fail to tackle structural issues such as housing and transport, and have largely overlooked the gender dimension. Furthermore, these interventions have not covered all areas in many regions. For example, the agricultural zones of Mondragone and Villa Literno in Campania have not yet been covered by these developments – but will soon be included in new government-financed initiatives.

It is worth mentioning that, in March 2023, the National Monitoring Committee for the implementation of the Strategic Plan of the European Common Agricultural Policy (CAP) 2023–2027 was established. Among other measures, it will introduce rules and monitoring mechanisms related to social conditionality. However, clear guidelines have yet to be defined.

2.3. Estimates and characteristics of the agricultural sector in Campania region

The agricultural sector in Campania is primarily concentrated in two main areas: the Piana del Sele enclave in the province of Salerno and the province of Caserta, along with smaller, more localized zones such as those in the province of Naples.

Unlike the area of Castel Volturno, in the provinces of Caserta and Naples agriculture is more closely tied to seasonality due to the types of crops grown – such as tomatoes, broccoli rabe, strawberries and peaches (Avallone & Niang 2018). However, the use of greenhouses for out-of-season cultivation has effectively stretched the seasonality of this area, as is the case in other agricultural areas of Campania. This has resulted in a year-round demand for labour, with peaks in the busiest periods of the year.

According to official data, the number of agricultural workers employed in Campania in 2024 was 67,243. Of these, 22,473 were non-EU migrant workers and 4,136 were EU migrant workers.¹ Foreign workers make up 40% of the total workforce, with a clear predominance of non-EU migrant workers. The Caserta area has the highest number of migrant workers.

As with other agricultural areas in the region, these parts of Campania are characterised by a diverse migrant labour force in terms of nationality and legal status. This latter includes people who are undocumented, have a residence permit for labour reasons, are temporary protection holders or are asylum seekers.

According to official data², the main nationalities in the Naples and Caserta areas are Moroccan, Indian and Romanian. However, other nationalities are also present. In the province of Caserta, for example, Castel Volturno's labour force also includes migrant workers from Sub-Saharan Africa, particularly Ghana and Nigeria. In Mondragone and in Villa Literno, other common nationalities are Bulgarian and Ukrainian. In the agricultural areas of Naples province, such as Acerra, Ukrainian workers also represent a significant group. The majority of migrant women employed as farmworkers in the provinces of Caserta and Acerra are from Ukraine, Bulgaria and Romania.

As studies have documented, dynamics of undeclared work and exploitation, by employers and/or illegal gang masters (known as *caporali*) characterise the working and living conditions of many migrant workers employed in the agricultural sector in Campania (Avallone 2022). These dynamics take on different forms and intensities depending on the intersection of gender, nationality and legal status (Avallone & Niang 2018; Staiano 2018).

¹ My elaboration of INPS data.

² My elaboration of INPS data.

3. Methodology

The ethnographic research for this study was conducted from February 2024 to April 2025 in the agricultural areas of Mondragone and Villa Literno, in the province of Caserta, and in the agricultural area of Acerra, in the province of Naples. These areas were selected for their high concentration of migrant women farmworkers, particularly from Ukraine, Bulgaria and Romania.

Data for this ethnographic research were collected through interviews, informal conversations and participant observation. I conducted twenty-one semi-structured interviews with migrant women and five follow-up interviews with five of the participants. The interviewees included 19 Ukrainians, one Pole and one Bulgarian (see appendix 1), mostly women between 35 and 50 years of age. One was undocumented at the time of the interview, while the others had regular status. All had experienced a period of irregularity in the past.

I held conversations with several key local stakeholders and interviewed six of them. These included a lawyer, a trade union representative, a member of a migrant-based association, a social worker from an anti-violence centre and an expert in the field of labour exploitation.

Participant observation was conducted at key locations, including parish churches and trade union premises in the areas of Mondragone and Villa Literno, as well as at the local health unit (*Aziende Sanitarie Locali* (ASL)) in Castel Volturno. Observation in the latter location was made possible thanks to the support of the Solidarci cooperative in Caserta, which enabled me to observe their legal aid services for migrants without a residence permit or in legally precarious situations. Although it concerned a different area from where I conducted the interviews — yet still within the province of Caserta — this experience at the ASL in Castel Volturno allowed me to better understand the numerous challenges faced by individuals entangled in the complex procedures of legal regularisation.

The research was conducted with the support of four community researchers – three Ukrainian cultural mediators and one Belarusian. These researchers were identified and selected with the help of ActionAid Italy, the national engagement partner for the I-Claim project. Throughout both the preliminary and main phases of the ethnographic study, the community researchers supported me by helping to identify key local actors and workers to involve in the research. They also took part in interviews and in moments of participant observation. One of the community researchers also contributed to the transcription of interviews and assisted with the data analysis.

The involvement of migrant women workers was facilitated through personal connections, stakeholder support and snowball sampling. This process was lengthy and challenging, partly due to the participants' demanding work rhythms and their need to fulfil family responsibilities. Furthermore, several women were initially reluctant to share personal and work-related stories.

All interviews with migrant women were conducted in person, while some of those with stakeholders were carried out remotely. The interviews with the workers were carried out at their homes, at a trade union office or in cafés where they felt safe. Almost all participants consented to having the interviews recorded, after being fully informed about the security and confidentiality measures specified by the research project and outlined in the consent form. The interviews were then fully transcribed and manually coded based on a list of relevant themes that emerged during the conversations.

Semi-structured interviews with migrant women workers focused on four main topics: legal status, working conditions/sectors, livelihoods and forms of mobilisation. The interviews were primarily conducted in Italian, although participants were free to switch to their native language (mainly Ukrainian) when needed. In addition to the semi-structured interviews, follow-up interviews adopted a more participatory approach. In particular, participants were invited to bring personal items – such as photos, jewellery or other cherished objects – to help better capture the embodied, lived and everyday experiences related to mobility, work and the role of family.

4. Field of irregularity: main ethnographic findings

4.1. Precarious regularisations: between legal uncertainty and a state of limbo

Most of the migrant women interviewed for this research had obtained legal status through a combination of pathways: amnesty programmes (*sanatorie*), temporary protection, international protection and Article 31 of the Consolidated Immigration Act (*Testo Unico*), which grants a residence permit based on the social integration of a migrant's child in Italy. Interestingly, only a few participants used the Flows Decree system (*Decreto Flussi*) as channel to enter the country, underscoring once more the inadequacies of what is officially the main legal channel for migrant workers in Italy, especially for seasonal workers.

Many of the women interviewed have gone through multiple transitions between irregular and regular legal status. This has meant enduring periods of temporariness, uncertainty and, in many cases, prolonged waiting – often occasioned by bureaucratic delays. Such conditions can lead to feelings of anger, frustration and exhaustion, ultimately affecting both mental and physical health.

As clearly emerged during the fieldwork, key actors – including professionals (such as lawyers) and fellow nationals (often in exchange for payment) – play a crucial role in advising and assisting migrants in navigating the bureaucratic system and procedures around issuance and/or renewal of residence permits. However, these actors can either shorten or prolong the time migrant people spend in legal limbo. In some cases, they play an ambiguous and opaque role, often because they themselves lack full knowledge of the relevant laws and procedures.

4.2. Irregularity, precarity and working conditions in the agricultural sector

In a national labour market that is highly segregated on the basis of gender, nationality and legal status, migrant women, particularly those considered low-skilled, often find themselves employed in such limited sectors, such as domestic and care work in households, agriculture and sex work (Garofalo, Geymonat, et al., 2023). It is therefore not surprising that most of the migrant women interviewed initially worked as live-in care workers (so-called *badanti*) before transitioning to the agricultural sector.

Agricultural work in the areas of Mondragone, Villa Literno and Acerra involves extensive greenhouse cultivation and includes both seasonal and non-seasonal production. As a result, workers who have a more stable relationship with certain companies are able to work year-round, while those in more precarious positions are employed only during growing seasons. Their hardest months are usually January and February when there is less demand for labour.

Workers typically work an average of 7-8 hours a day, from 5 a.m. to 13.00/14.00. Sometimes, some also work in the afternoon from 14.00 to 16.00/17.00. Most workers are employed on a full-time basis, often working

throughout the week, including Sundays, and frequently in high temperatures during the summer. In some cases, they wear gloves (that are not provided by the employers) but rarely wear masks, even when using strong herbicides.

Widespread irregular employment in agriculture affects not only undocumented workers but also those with regular legal status. Many women with regular (but temporary) residence permits report having contracts that reflect less working hours or days than actually performed by the workers, revealing the significant greying of labour relations in this sector. Sometimes the remaining unpaid extra hours are compensated for under the table.

As women workers interviewed have revealed, their average income for 7-8 hours has increased from around 27 euros per day ten years ago to 50 euros/day today. This is below what they should earn according to the minimum pay set out in the provincial collective agreements³. Indeed, according to the rules, they should work six and a half hours per day (which, for base-level workers, amounts to approximately €49.40 per day in Caserta and €49.70 per day in Naples) and any additional hours should be paid as overtime with a 25% increase (Mazzarella, 2023). Overall, for most women interviewed it is poor work which leaves workers struggling to meet even the most basic needs for a dignified life. Indeed, even when they work for several consecutive months most of the women interviewed still struggle to pay their rent, buy groceries and cover their children's expenses.

As participants have underlined, this type of work is characterised by the gendering of tasks: women pick and men load the crates. This division partly reflects stereotypical gender roles, based on the idea that women's hands are gentler and better suited to delicate tasks such as picking, whereas men are considered better suited to heavier labour. In some cases, this division also results in a pay gap; men who load the crates are sometimes paid more because their work is considered more physically demanding (see also Piro 2023).

Women are paid more when they act as team leaders, coordinating and supervising their co-workers. The women interviewed referred to people in this role as *caporali* or *caposquadra*. In many companies, this role is often filled by migrant women. However, gender discrimination can occur at other levels in such cases. For instance, male workers may refuse to be supervised by women.

Legal status, and in particular the lack of legal documentation, constitutes another critical factor in shaping wage levels. Numerous female workers highlight that individuals without proper papers are frequently subjected to lower pay. Furthermore, the absence of a residence permit significantly undermines bargaining power in the workplace and increases the risk of losing one's job. As one of the workers argued, "If you're undocumented, it's easier for them to get rid of you" (MIG34_AGR_IT_CE).

Many women workers also expressed their fear of being undocumented in the workplace and of the potential consequences. "There have been times", stressed one of the workers, "when we've had to run away because the labour inspectors were coming" (MIG05_AGR_IT_CE). There is also a perception that employers have limited ability to regularise the migration status of their workers.

³ Provincial collective agreements are agreements signed at the provincial level between workers' trade union organisations and employers' associations within a specific sector (e.g., agriculture).

As a worker argued:

I've always had a lot of fear... and I'll tell you the truth — even now, for people who don't have documents... many Italians genuinely want to help with the paperwork, but there's no opportunity. There are no options... no amnesties... let's just say I had to wait almost ten years to get my documents (MIG04_AGR_IT_NA).

A different view emerges on employment irregularities. Many women with non-work residence permits see little benefit in formal contracts, except to access family benefits like the universal child allowance. Some even purchase contracts — one worker paid €1,000 for a contract from an employer she does not actually work for — while continuing irregular work elsewhere.

4.3. Practices of exploitation

Some farmworkers are often required to work with minimal breaks and face restrictions on speaking with colleagues during work hours. Restrictions regarding conversations are not only intended to limit distractions during work hours but also because employers do not understand what they are saying when speaking in their own language. Therefore, it also becomes a way to prevent workers from bonding, making alliances and adopting a critical collective stance.

Some employers provide water and snacks, while others do not. It is not uncommon for employers to insult workers: “we work every day, even on Sundays. Some bosses insult us. We are treated like pigs” (MIG05_AGR_IT_CE). There are also cases of physical aggression. As one of the women workers interviewed pointed out:

on one occasion, the employer hit a female worker's hand with an object and it swelled up badly. She had been packing peaches and had made a mistake (MIG35_AGR_IT_CE).

The role of workers identified by other workers as *caposquadra* or *caporali* is ambiguous. Most are migrant women workers. In some cases, they serve as points of reference for other female workers and are even called “mama” — a nickname that highlights the maternal-like care and sense of responsibility they show toward others. In other cases, however, these same team leaders may display aggressive or violent behaviour toward co-workers, and their relationship with employers can also be ambiguous:

I've worked in companies where the bosses and team leaders were very harsh, and if you complain about anything, you work for a day or two and then you're left without a job (MIG06_AGR_IT_CE).

4.4. The impact on bodies

Most of the women workers interviewed reported that there are no toilets (even chemical toilets) on the farms and that they have to go into the fields:

We go to the 'bathroom' behind the greenhouses... and anyway, the countryside is often dirty, with paper, plastic and other waste... (MIG06_AGR_IT_CE).

As reported by some workers, chemical toilets are often not provided in order to avoid inspections by labour inspectors, especially when there are undocumented workers. Employers fear that their presence could signal that work is being carried out.

As temperatures are extremely hot in the summer it is not uncommon for some workers to be unable to keep up and to fall ill. For instance, one of the women reported that:

One time it was so hot under the greenhouse that I started vomiting. I went home and didn't go to work the next day, and then the employer didn't want me back anymore (MIG34_AGR_IT_CE)

Employers want "healthy" workers because having unhealthy workers poses a risk for them – not only in terms of productivity, but also in terms of potential inspections. As one of the interviewees underlined,

the employers are afraid too, because if something happens at work, they say "Stay home," since if something goes wrong, they're the ones held responsible. They don't want workers who are unwell (MIG35_AGR_IT_CE).

It is not rare for female workers to have developed allergies. Many women suffer from back problems and other physical issues. The common feeling is that this work significantly affects their bodies:

Working in the fields has changed my whole body. I come home feeling dead, everything hurts. My body feels like it's burning (MIG05_AGR_IT_CE).

To cope with the physical strain of intense work, many women workers adopt specific, strategic postures. The frequent use of anti-inflammatories is common: "I hurt everywhere... the only way to go to work every day is by taking ibuprofen" (MIG39_AGR_IT_CE). Overall, pain tolerance is high, and hospital visits are avoided unless absolutely necessary, as they are seen as disruptive to work.⁴

4.5. Exploitation and the links with gender-based violence

As has been observed in other agricultural contexts across the country (Palumbo, 2022; Giammarinaro, 2022; Corrado et al., 2023), sexist remarks, harassment and sexual requests unfortunately constitute a daily reality for many women agricultural workers.

These dynamics can occur at any time and in all their work spaces, including inside greenhouses or in vans transporting workers to the fields. Those who refuse – which is more complicated for those who are undocumented or whose residence permit depends on a work contract – risk losing their job. In this regard, a woman worker shared her experience:

One employer made a [sexual related] request to me and another worker during the lunch break... We refused. Then he said, "Leave, because you're not working well..." My friend and I had to walk home through the countryside for kilometres, under the sun (MIG34_AGR_IT_CE)

⁴ It should be mentioned that in Italy, undocumented third-country nationals have the right to receive all urgent or essential medical care, including continuous care, for illnesses and injuries.

Similar dynamics have also been experienced by some women in domestic work, highlighting how moving from one sector to another often means encountering comparable patterns of exploitation and violence. Moreover, many women have experienced – or continue to experience – domestic violence, in the form of physical, psychological or economic abuse. In many cases, it was domestic violence that forced them to leave their home countries in the first place. This is the case of the aforementioned worker who, as she told me, had to escape because life with her ex-husband was “a living hell”. However, she later faced different forms of gender-based violence in Italy, revealing how the cycle of violence often cuts across – and sometimes simultaneously affects – different spheres, including both domestic and workplace environments.

4.6. Poor and differently (in)formal housing conditions

The housing conditions of most migrant agricultural workers are very different from those of migrant farmworkers in other regions of Italy. While migrant workers in other agricultural areas often live in isolated locations, such as informal encampments or directly on farms (e.g. in greenhouses), many migrant farmworkers employed in the provinces of Caserta and Naples live in apartment buildings in urban areas. They pay for these themselves. These buildings often do not conform to required building standards and, in some cases, are dilapidated and let without a formal rental contract. As one of the experts interviewed for this research pointed out,

Unlike other regions, Campania is not represented by the narrative that identifies ghettos as places where farm workers live. Based on our analysis, this is due to the availability of housing units — properties that would not be viable on the regular market because they are substandard, with many lacking connections to the sewage system, for example (EXPO6_AGR_IT_NA).

While housing irregularities and informal rentals affect both locals and migrants, they are often more severe and concentrated among undocumented or legally precarious migrants. A striking example is the “Palazzi Cirio” in Mondragone – dilapidated apartment blocks inhabited almost entirely by migrant workers (mainly Bulgarians, Romanians and Ukrainians). These ‘vertical ghettos’ are overcrowded, poorly maintained and characterised by informal ownership and rental arrangements.

Since most workers live in urban centres, the workplaces – the fields and greenhouses – are far away. Workers travel to the fields by vans driven by locals or migrants assigned this role by employers. There are meeting points where workers board vans and are dropped off and picked up at the end of the day.

This routine reinforces the repetitive and exhausting daily lives: waking at dawn, taking the van to the fields, working under exhausting conditions and returning home to cook and care for their families. With work often extending into Sundays, there is little time for anything else. The repetition and compression (also spatial) of their days are such that, in some cases, women cannot even get to know or orient themselves in the environment where they live. One worker for instance said: “I’ve been here for three years, and I still can’t find my way around. I only know the way to the supermarket” (MIG38_AGR_IT_CE).

Although most farmworkers live in urban areas, poor public transport links in Campania’s agricultural zones limit mobility. In Mondragone, for instance, the train station is eight km. away and the infrequent shuttle service rarely coincides with train schedules. As a result, informal and illegal taxi services run by locals and migrants have become commonplace.

4.7. The effects of irregular and exploitative living and working conditions on household dynamics

Most of the migrant women interviewed for this research have children who are currently with them. This includes Ukrainian women who arrived in Italy with their children after the 2022 Russian invasion, as well as those who initially moved to Italy alone and were later joined by their children, or who moved with their husbands and subsequently had children in Italy.

All interviewees reported being primarily responsible for reproductive and care work within their families, which is a significant burden when combined with the demanding schedules and rhythms of agricultural work, often involving waking at dawn. This burden is further exacerbated by the lack of effective welfare and social services. Public nurseries, preschools and other children's services are practically non-existent in most of the areas covered by this fieldwork.

Most of the women workers do not have a solid family network to turn to and many thus rely on informal arrangements, seeking local women who can act as babysitters. Since they leave for the fields at dawn and stay there until the afternoon, many workers pay someone to take their children to school, pick them up and look after them until they return from the fields:

I pay a local woman 50 euros a month to take my daughter to school, pick her up and stay with her in the afternoon. Then I pay another woman to look after my baby, who is just a few months old. I pay her 12 to 20 euros a day, depending on how many hours she stays with her. If I don't do this, I can't work...(MIG40_AGR_IT_CE).

Covering these costs, especially in the absence of benefits – and particularly for those who are undocumented or are changing legal status and cannot access welfare support – is truly challenging and an additional source of stress and anxiety for many women workers. As mentioned above, some people purchase work contracts so as to obtain a residence permit and access family benefits. However, there are also those, like one of the women interviewed, who are in the process of formalising their asylum application and are therefore unable to obtain a work contract. Consequently, they have no access to family allowance.

4.8. Marginalisation, discrimination and the colour line

Living in social isolation with intense work routines leaves no space beyond work, impacting key barriers to inclusion like language. Many women workers expressed frustration – sometimes tearfully – over not mastering Italian, fuelling their sense of powerlessness and hindering social and work inclusion. Language also reinforces their feeling of being “foreign”, especially for Eastern European migrants, where colour line dynamics differ with respect to other migrant groups.

Many women reported always feeling treated as ‘foreigners’, especially when they are or have been undocumented. They say they are therefore seen not as individuals to be supported, but as people to be feared and perceived as potential risks, even when emergencies arise. For example, one of the workers told me:

Once, a car with an Italian man hit me. I was injured because he threw me onto the bonnet, and I fell back, hitting my head on the pavement. He took me to the hospital. But when the carabinieri and police arrived and found out I didn't have documents, that was the end of it! They treated me like... how do you say? Like I was nobody (MIG04_AGR_IT_NA).

On the other hand, dynamics of discrimination and colour play a role also in the relationship between the Ukrainian and African communities. Many Ukrainian women tend to distrust Africans even though they come to depend on the informal services they provide – such as illegal taxi services which make them more mobile. This was clearly evident in a conversation I had with one of the Ukrainian women I encountered during participant observation at the local health authority (ASL) in Castel Volturno. She said:

We're in Africa here... can't you see?' The only good thing is the Nigerian taxi service. Thanks to them, I can take my mother to the doctor, and it only costs two euros. There are no buses here (notes from participant observation).

4.9. Networks, spaces for socialisation, frustration

Few of the migrant women interviewed actively participate in social or community spaces, partly due to the demands of work and family care responsibilities. For many women, the local parish is the main point of reference: “The parish is the only place I go to when I’m not at work or at home with my family” (MIG40_AGR_IT_CE).

For some women, the trade union is mainly a point of reference for fiscal and contractual matters. In fact, many women only know of it for these reasons and not for its activism and political mobilisation. Many women are not interested in this dimension of trade unionism. This is either because their hectic work and lives do not allow them to engage, or because they feel very frustrated and believe that nobody can hear them and that nothing can change their situation, especially when they are in a precarious legal status. One of the women workers told me: “why should I get involved in a trade union? No one would listen to me. Everyone only thinks about themselves” (MIG01_AGR_IT_NA).

5. Conclusion: The invasive dimension of exploitation and need for structural actions

Irregularities related to legal statuses and/or contractual dimensions characterise the experiences of many migrant workers employed in agriculture. This can happen multiple times and in several phases. As this report has underlined, it is striking how many women migrant farmworkers have gone through periods of irregularity, followed by precarious and temporary regularity, then again irregularity and once more regularity.

The inadequacies of the national migrant worker entry system, coupled with the characteristics of agricultural work – particularly its seasonal nature and historically high level of undeclared work – foster irregularities in residence permits and contracts. These dynamics affect women’s experiences differently, resulting in varying impacts, employment relationships, wages and exploitation.

What clearly emerges is the *invasive* nature of forms of exploitation which go beyond the strict work dimension and permeate every aspect of life, compressing its essential spheres. Agricultural work is characterised by poor pay, long hours, difficult commutes and inadequate housing conditions, reducing life outside of work to a mere appendage. This has a significant impact on family dynamics and care work within the family, which predominantly falls to women.

In recent years, alongside increasingly restrictive migration policies, there have been efforts at the national level to combat labour exploitation, particularly in agriculture. While some significant steps have been taken, little progress has been made in terms of structural interventions, such as those concerning housing and transport conditions. Furthermore, a gender perspective has been almost absent. Recently adopted regional actions aim to place greater emphasis on gender issues and extend their reach to areas of Campania such as Mondragone and Villa Literno, which have not yet been covered. It is hoped that these interventions will address multiple interconnected issues, such as migration, labour, welfare and gender and will tackle the root causes of irregularity and exploitation comprehensively.

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7. Appendix

Table 1 Women migrant worker participants

Nr.	Yoda Codes	Age	Country of Origin	Legal status	Family Status
1	MIG01_AGR_IT	40s	Ukraine	Residence permit for work reasons	Divorced, with two children
2	MIG02_AGR_IT	50s	Ukraine	Residence permit for work reasons	Married
3	MIG03_AGR_IT	50s	Ukraine	Residence permit for work reasons	Single
4	MIG04_AGR_IT	50s	Ukraine	Residence permit for work reason	Married with two sons
5	MIG05_AGR_IT	40s	Ukraine	Holder of subsidiary protection	Married with two sons
6	MIG06_AGR_IT	40s	Ukraine	Awaiting the issue of a residence permit	With a partner and two children.
7	MIG07_AGR_IT	60s	Ukraine	Residence permit for work reason	Married with three sons.
8	MIG08_AGR_IT	60s	Ukraine	Residence permit for work reason	Widow with two sons
9	MIG10_AGR_IT	40s	Poland	EU citizenship	Divorced, with two sons
10	MIG27_AGR_IT	40s	Ukraine	Residence permit for work reason	With a partner and two children.
11	MIG29_AGR_IT	60s	Ukraine	Italian citizenship	Married with two daughters
12	MIG31_AGR_IT	30s	Ukraine	Residence permit for work reason	Married with two children
13	MIG32_AGR_IT	20s	Ukraine	Residence permit for work reason	Married with one child
14	MIG33_AGR_IT	40s	Bulgaria	EU citizenship	Married with two sons
15	MIG34_AGR_IT	30s	Ukraine	Awaiting the issue of a residence permit	With a partner and three children
16	MIG35_AGR_IT	50s	Ukraine	awaiting the renewal of the residence permit for work reasons	Single
17	MIG36_AGR_IT	60s	Ukraine	Asylum seeker	Widow with two sons
18	MIG37_AGR_IT	60s	Ukraine	undocumented	Married with two daughters
19	MIG38_AGR_IT	40s	Ukraine	Temporary Protection holder	Divorced, with one son
20	MIG39_AGR_IT	40s	Ukraine	Asylum seeker	Divorced, with three children
21	MIG40_AGR_IT	40s	Ukraine	Temporary Protection holder	Married, with two children

Table 2 Follow up interviews

1	MIG29_AGR_IT
2	MIG31_AGR_IT
3	MIG32_AGR_IT
4	MIG04_AGR_IT
5	MIG33_AGR_IT

Table 3 Stakeholder participants

1	EXP01_AGR_IT	Migration Law Lawyer
2	EXP02_AGR_IT	Priest
3	EXP03_AGR_IT	Representative of a Trade Union
4	EXP04_AGR_IT	Representative of a migrant rights' organisation
5	EXP05_AGR_IT	Representative of an anti-gender violence centre
6	EXP06_AGR_IT	Expert and representative of an NGO specialising in labour exploitation.

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