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Transnational Parenthood and Migrant Subjective Well-Being in Italy

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# **Transnational Parenthood and Migrant Subjective Well-Being in Italy**

## **Abstract**

Transnational parents are migrant mothers and fathers who have at least one child left behind in the home country. Despite their non-negligible prevalence in many destination countries, scarcity of data on the topic has caused a lack of attention to this phenomenon in both policy and scholarship. In particular, little is known about how the interplay between migration and family relations at a distance affects the individual well-being of both migrant parents and their left-behind children, especially in a European context. This article evaluates the subjective well-being of migrant couples currently residing in Italy who have children left behind, compared with childless migrants and with migrant parents living with their children in Italy. Multivariate logistic regression applied to individual-level data from Istat's Survey on Social condition and integration of foreign citizens, 2011–2012, shows that transnational parents experienced lower levels of self-rated health compared with migrants with different family statuses and that the well-being loss associated with transnational parenthood is strongly gendered. Controlling for individual characteristics, socio-economic conditions, the presence of minor children, and migration background, our analysis demonstrates that men's subjective well-being did not vary based on their family status, while transnational mothers experienced significantly lower well-being compared with childless migrant women. Our research suggests the need for adopting a transnational approach to migration starting from data gathering, for instance through the design and implementation of multi-sited and retrospective surveys.

## Introduction

Migrant lives are often transnational by nature, involving multiple places, moves, and statuses (Beauchemin, 2014) and should not be simplistically considered as one-way travelers aiming at settling down upon arrival to start a new life in the destination country (Hugo, 2014). Whatever their mobility pattern—short-term, circular, onwards, or return migration—the linkages that international migrants maintain with the home country are manifold: visits, transactions, communications, care, and affective ties are constantly arranged from a distance, especially by those who migrate while continuing to participate in family life across borders (Beauchemin, 2014).

Transnational families often include a couple, with or without young children, where at least one adult member is currently living abroad (Mazzucato et al., 2015). Despite their prevalence worldwide (DeWaard, Nobles, & Donato, 2018; Mazzucato & Schans, 2011), the scarcity of suitable data on transnational families has caused a lack of quantitative evidence on how the interplay between migration and family relations at a distance impacts individual well-being of both migrants and their left-behind family (Dito et al., 2017). Some scholarly initiatives<sup>1</sup> are starting to pave the way to filling such a knowledge gap (see, e.g., Cebotari, Mazzucato, & Appiah, 2018; Haagsman, Mazzucato, & Dito, 2015), but further research is needed to evaluate how migration experiences and the individual well-being of transnational family members are

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<sup>1</sup> The well-being of families divided by international migration is currently being studied by the Transnational Child-Raising Arrangements between Africa and Europe (TCRAf-EU) and the Mobility Trajectories of Young Lives (MO-TRAYL), led by the University of Maastricht (NL) between Ghana, the Democratic Republic of Congo, Angola, Nigeria, and Northern Europe.

interconnected, particularly in a European context. Moreover, how to define the concept of ‘well-being’ is itself subject to continuous interdisciplinary debate, despite near-universal agreement that it is multidimensional (Stiglitz, Sen, & Fitoussi, 2009) and that evaluations should encompass its many facets.

In this article we focus on Italy, which is an interesting study site for three main reasons. First, the countries of Southern Europe—Italy in particular—have become the most important destinations of migration flows toward Europe since the 1990s, due to the opening of migration routes between the former Western and Eastern blocks (Bonifazi et al., 2008) and the increasing centrality of the Mediterranean migration route connecting North Africa and the Middle East with Europe (Colucci, 2018). Second, while during the 2000s, Italy attracted mainly labor migrants, more recent immigration flows have been characterized by a rising number of immigrant families, as seen in the increase in family permits, foreigners’ marriages, and family reunification within the country (Barbiano di Belgiojoso & Terzera, 2018; Bonifazi, 2017; Impicciatore et al., 2021). Finally, due to the scarcity of quantitative data on transnational families at both the large- and small-scale survey level, studies on the relationship between transnational family practices and migrant well-being in Italy are virtually non-existent. Although ethnographic approaches have been used to investigate this topic in a qualitative fashion (Banfi & Boccagni, 2011; Boccagni, 2010, 2011, 2012; Riccio, 2008), quantitative investigation may provide further evidence of how transnational parenting affects migrants’ living conditions and their chances to live a fulfilling existence in the host country. Furthermore, research on transnational fathers in Italy is still limited, regardless of the approach used (Ambrosini, 2019).

This article uses the Italian National Institute of Statistics (Istat) Survey on Social condition and integration of foreign citizens 2011–2012 (Istat, 2016a) to explore the subjective well-being

of transnational parents—foreign migrants who have at least one child in the home country—residing in Italy. In particular, we compare transnational parents’ self-rated health to that of childless migrants and migrant parents who did not have children left behind, that is, who either experienced family formation for the first time in Italy or immigrated there along with their family. Since transnational parenting is strongly gendered (Dreby, 2006; Fresnoza-Flot, 2009; Parreñas, 2005), we adopted a gender-sensitive perspective by contrasting the experiences of migrant mothers and fathers. To ensure the highest level of comparability between genders, we focused our analytical lens on the characteristics and living conditions of cohabiting partners. Our main findings demonstrate that while transnational mothers experienced significantly lower well-being compared with childless migrant women, men’s subjective well-being did not vary based on their family status.

To develop these ideas, the article is organized as follows. Section 2 reviews the relevant literature on transnational parenting and migrant well-being and, based on the knowledge gaps identified, formulates the research hypotheses. It also describes the specificities of the Italian context. Section 3 lays out the data and methods used to perform the empirical analysis. Section 4 presents the results, and Section 5 concludes, providing elements for discussion.

## **Literature Review and Research Hypotheses**

### ***Transnational parents and migrant well-being***

According to the United Nations Department of Economic and Social Affairs Population Division (2017), international migrants were estimated to number 270 million worldwide in 2017, 3.5% of the global population. Among international migrants, there are often members of the same family who live in different countries. Many of them qualify as *left-behinds*, including the children

growing up with parental absence via migration (DeWaard et al., 2018; Mazzucato, 2015). In these circumstances, transnational parents care from a distance, often practicing the parent-child relationship in conditions of prolonged physical separation (Bernardi, 2011). In such cases, migrants are confronted with difficult trade-offs between different aspects of parenting (Carling, Menjivar, & Schmalzbauer, 2012): securing children's livelihoods, on the one hand, and providing emotional care, on the other.

In research on the causes and consequences of international migration, families are often seen as nuclear (e.g., Mazzucato et al, 2015) and treated as units trying to maximize the collective benefits deriving from deciding whether to migrate, who among the family members will leave first, and where to resettle (DaVanzo, 1976). However, migration's costs and benefits affect family members in different ways (Mazzucato & Schans, 2011), with gains and losses associated with migration also involving non-monetary aspects of well-being (Amit & Riss, 2014; Cooke, 2008). Indeed, well-being is a multidimensional concept that encompasses several aspects of human life (Stiglitz, Sen, & Fitoussi, 2009). In research on migrant well-being, it is common to find assessments of migrants' objective living conditions in the destination country, mostly related to their employment, housing, education, and health statuses (D'Isanto, Fouskas, & Verde, 2016; OECD, 2017). Subjective aspects of well-being are usually considered as well, for instance, through the exploration of migrants' emotional and psychological health (see Dito et al., 2017 for a thorough review of this literature). Subjective well-being is a crucial component of human life: being happy, having self-respect, and satisfying one's own desires and aspirations all play important roles in determining the sense of *being well* (Sen, 1993). Diener & Diener (1995) include family relationships among the most important cross-cultural determinants of subjective well-being. However, Dito and colleagues (2017) report that in quantitative migration research, only a

few studies have considered the interrelationship between well-being statuses and family characteristics, including variables such as family size, marital status, or the presence of children or a spouse in migrants' lives (Cavazos-Rehg, Zayas, & Spitznagel, 2007; Hao & Johnson, 2000). These studies seem to neglect, however, relations and affective ties that are not practiced in conditions of geographical proximity, reflecting the rather strong assumption that migrant well-being is not affected by relationships pursued across borders.

Recent empirical research considering migration systems connecting Northern Europe with Western and Central Africa has started to uncover the links between transnational family care and household members' well-being. Building on multi-sited surveys conducted in both origin and destination countries, this growing literature shows that individual well-being is, indeed, affected by parental care at a distance. For instance, left-behind children suffer, under some circumstances, from lower psychological well-being (Mazzucato, Cebotari, et al., 2015), lower self-rated health (Cebotari, Mazzucato, & Siegel, 2017), and weaker educational performance (Cebotari & Mazzucato, 2016). More importantly, subjective well-being assessments indicate that migrant parents also report consistently lower levels of life satisfaction (Dito et al., 2017; Haagsman, Mazzucato, & Dito, 2015; Mazzucato, Dito, Grassi, & Vivet, 2017), as well as distress and even social stigma because of their absence and detachment from their left-behind family members (Bernhard, Landolt, & Goldring, 2008; Schmalzbauer, 2004).

Within this framework, gender emerges as a key factor. Since parenting and family care responsibilities are strongly gendered in many societies, migrant mothers live the parent-child relationship differently than do fathers (Dreby, 2006; Fresnoza-Flot, 2009; Parreñas, 2015). Although both migrant mothers and fathers often sustain their children's basic needs through material provision and remittances while trying to mitigate the costs of separation (Zentgraf &

Chinchilla, 2012), women are expected to continue providing emotional proximity from afar to a larger extent than are their male counterparts (Parreñas, 2005). If migrant fathers usually see sending remittances as their main care responsibility, mothers tend also to foster emotional contact with their children by exerting control over them (Boccagni, 2010, 2011, 2012), trying to maintain emotional intimacy, and fulfilling parental responsibilities for children's social and emotional needs (Dreby, 2006; Parreñas, 2005). Migrant mothers who leave their children's care to others, especially when the absence from home is longstanding, report feelings of distress, fears of social stigma, and a sense of guilt (Bernhard et al., 2008; Schmalzbauer, 2004). On the one hand, transnational motherhood proves to challenge gender norms and social imaginaries of motherhood, according to which mothers who migrate internationally for wage work leave behind a void that cannot be filled by other caregivers (Zentgraf & Chinchilla, 2012). On the other hand, the pressure placed on migrant mothers may affect their well-being by limiting their chances of integration in the destination country (Abrego, 2009).

### ***The Italian context***

The current immigration framework in Italy is the result of at least forty years of history. Immigration to Italy started in the late 1970s, but the foreign population's massive growth occurred between the 1990s and the 2000s (Colucci 2018). At the beginning of the process, the main origin areas were Northern Africa (Morocco, Tunisia, and Egypt), the Middle East, and Southeast Asia (Philippines, China, and Sri Lanka) (Bonifazi, 2013). East-West migration increased during the 1990s, after the fall of the Berlin wall and collapse of the Soviet Union, with the arrival of Albanians and then ex-Yugoslavian citizens during the Balkans conflict (Buonomo et al., 2020). Migration from Romania increased rapidly at the beginning of the 21<sup>st</sup> century, in particular after



the 2007 EU enlargement (Bonifazi, 2017). A large number of economic migrants were attracted in the 2000s because of Italy's high demand for labor in family-care services, in factories (mainly in central and northern Italy), and in the southern agricultural sector (Istat, 2016b). In Italy, the number of refugees and asylum-seekers has remained quite low, except for a peak between 2015 and 2017 related to people coming mainly from Africa (Strozza & Gabrielli, 2020).

Overall, on 1 January 2021, there were 5.01 million residents with foreign citizenship in Italy, with widely different geographical origins and migration histories: the largest origin groups are Romanians, Albanians, and Moroccans, representing respectively 22.7%, 8.2%, and 8.1% of the foreign residents.<sup>2</sup> Italy is particularly appropriate as a case study for parenting across borders, since its growing migrant population in recent decades has also resulted in the rising number of immigrant families (Bonifazi, 2017; Impicciatore et al., 2021) and, consequently, an increasing presence of transnational families, especially for Eastern Europeans (Barbiano di Belgiojoso & Terzera, 2018). Nevertheless, research on transnational families in Italy has been carried out almost entirely in a qualitative fashion and mainly on women (Ambrosini, 2019). Focusing on processes of reunification, gender-related aspects of transnational parenting, and social protection for left-behind family members, ethnographic research shows the tension experienced in particular by migrant mothers between the economic opportunities enjoyed in Italy and their left-behind families' well-being (Ambrosini 2019; Ducu, 2014; Piperno, 2007; Solari, 2010; Vianello, 2009). Lone transnational mothers from selected Eastern European countries like Romania and Ukraine who are employed in the domestic sector seem to be especially concerned by such a tension and

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<sup>2</sup> Register data as of December 31, 2020. Retrieved on 2 December 2021 from <http://demo.istat.it>.

are reported to suffer from isolation, both during and after their stay in Italy (Ducu 2014; Marchetti & Venturini, 2014). Distance from home and the type of residence status also matter: rarely seeing one's family for several years is common among mothers who only have a temporary permit to reside in Italy or come from a faraway country like Ecuador (Banfi & Boccagni, 2011) or the Philippines (Parreñas, 2015). Distance and reduced personal contacts increase migrant mothers' feelings of pain and sense of guilt engendered by the weakening of communication, care, and control ties with their children (Boccagni, 2010, 2011, 2012). Migration, on the other hand, may also provide parents with important status recognition in the home country, which can be a source of personal satisfaction and constant bargaining with the extended transnational family, as in the case of Ghanaians and Senegalese men living and working in Italy (Riccio, 2008).

Nevertheless, the greatest knowledge gap is on the quantitative research side. In Italy, official statistics have not implemented migrant surveys that account for transnational family ties and practices. One remarkable attempt was made by the *Migrations between Africa and Europe* (MAFE) project (Beauchemin, 2018), which provides statistical information on migration patterns and their links with family changes for a sample of Senegalese nationals living in Italy. The MAFE survey, however, does not explicitly look at the well-being implications of parental care in migration contexts. Hence, the strong body of empirical studies conducted on the MAFE Senegalese-Italian data does not include investigations on the linkages between well-being and transnational family ties.<sup>3</sup>

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<sup>3</sup> For an overview of studies conducted using the MAFE data, see the two special issues published in *International Migration Review* (Volume 48, Issue 4; Volume 49, Issue 5) in 2014 and 2015, as well as Beauchemin (2018).

## ***Research hypotheses***

Building on these premises and focusing on expectations related to transnational parents living in Italy, we formulate four research hypotheses. The first is the following:

*H1 (Transnational parenthood effect): Transnational parents show lower levels of subjective well-being compared to childless migrants and to migrant parents living with all their children.*

The gender differences highlighted above lead to the expectation that transnational parenthood affects migrant mothers' and fathers' subjective well-being differently. Thus, the second hypothesis is:

*H2 (Gender effect): Migrant mothers tend to be more affected than migrant fathers by having their children left behind.*

We expect that the parent-child bond during early childhood is particularly strong, notably among mothers. Thus, the age of children left behind can be a relevant factor in shaping transnational parents' subjective well-being. Our third hypothesis is:

*H3 (Minor children): Separation from minor children (i.e., under the age of 15) tends to worsen parental subjective well-being to a greater extent than separation from adult children, particularly among mothers.*

Eastern Europe is the most frequent immigrant origin in Italy, and women from Romania, Ukraine, and Moldova are among the most populous female immigrant groups (Fondazione ISMU, 2021). Migrant women from these areas are often highly educated and tend to emigrate later in life as the main actor of migration, very often with previous partnership and fertility experience (Impicciatore et al., 2020; Marchetti & Venturini, 2014). Within Italy, transnational mothers from Eastern

Europe are mainly employed in care work and, as suggested by ethnographic research, are particularly exposed to the distress linked to transnational parenting (Ducu 2009; Piperno 2007; Solari, 2010). Therefore, our fourth hypothesis is:

*H4 (Eastern European mothers): Transnational parenting can be particularly stressful for Eastern European mothers compared to those with different origins.*

## **Methodology**

### ***Data***

The data used in this article are the Istat Survey on Social condition and integration of foreign citizens 2011–2012<sup>4</sup> (Istat, 2016a), which is representative for households with at least one foreign-born member legally residing in Italy. The survey contains a sample of 9,553 households and 20,379 individuals. Because it was not explicitly designed to observe transnational practices or relationships, we reconstructed the transnational parent profile by developing an *ad hoc* identification strategy. First, we selected the sub-sample of first-generation immigrants aged 15–64 years old who were born in a foreign country or immigrated to Italy at 15 years of age or more. Second, we selected cohabiting couples interviewed as part of the same household. We excluded individuals living alone for two main reasons: i) the Istat survey contains incomplete information about children of men not living with a partner and ii) we wanted higher comparability between men and women within the sample and, thus, excluded relevant gendered factors of heterogeneity linked to the presence (or absence) of a partner in the household. Finally, we identified as transnational parents those migrant parents with at least one child who:

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<sup>4</sup> For further information, see <https://www.istat.it/en/archive/191097>

- (i) was born before the last migration to Italy took place;
- (ii) did not migrate to Italy with their parents; and
- (iii) was living in the origin country at the time of the survey.

Such identification was used to create a family status variable that categorized migrant parents into the following three statuses: the *childless, non-transnational parents* (non-TNPs), and *transnational parents* (TNPs).

The resulting subsample (first-generation immigrants aged between 15 and 64 years old currently living with a partner) included 6,060 individuals (3,030 men and 3,030 women). In the subsample, transnational parents represent 6.2% of the total, come mainly from Eastern Europe (32%)—especially Romania, Ukraine, and the Northern Republic of Macedonia—and from the Philippines, Peru, Morocco, and Ecuador. They are concentrated in older age classes (65% of them being over 45 years old) and very often married (87.1%). In half the cases (54.6%), transnational parents had at least an upper secondary school degree, and 68% reported being employed.

Table 1 shows the main features of our subsample according to family status. Migrants who had at least one child in the home country were more represented in the 45–64 age class (17.3 percent), while they were less than 5% in the class 35–44, and 0.8% in the 15–35 age band.<sup>5</sup> About 9% of not-married migrants were TNPs, while the same percentage fell to 5.9 for married individuals. TNPs were also easier to find among those who had 3 or more children (10.8%), while they were comparatively less represented (5.4% on average) among those who had up to 2 children.

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<sup>5</sup> Of course, older respondents, especially those aged 45 or more, were more likely to also have older children who can stay at origin without their parents, meaning that family arrangements may depend on the age of the children rather than on the age of respondents themselves.

Concerning socio-economic conditions, the distribution of TNPs is generally equal across educational levels and activity statuses, with a slightly increased presence of them among the legally employed (6.9%, compared to 5.1% among the illegally employed and 5.4% among the not employed). In terms of geographical representation, Ukrainians showed the highest concentration of TNPs (23.6%), followed by other Eastern Europeans (8.5% among Romanians and 9.2% in the Eastern Europe region on average) and Latin Americans (with 13.3% of TNPs). Migrants born in North America and the European Union also showed a non-negligible percentage of transnational parents, although they were markedly fewer in Italy in absolute numbers compared to other nationalities.<sup>6</sup> Finally, looking at the frequency of visits to the home country, we can see that TNPs were more represented among those who reported going back to their origin country at least once a year (7.6%) and the least represented in the group of those who seldom or never returned (4.9%).

[TABLE 1 ABOUT HERE]

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<sup>6</sup> The origin country was identified as the birth country or the country the migrant considered to be their origin country in cases where it did not coincide with that of birth. Countries were then aggregated in the following world regions: Eastern Europe and the Balkans, Middle East and North Africa, Asia, Sub-Saharan Africa, and a residual category (Other) including Western Europe, North America, the Pacific, and Latin America and the Caribbean.

To investigate subjective well-being, we focused on an indicator accounting for individuals' self-rated health (SRH), assessed on a 1 (poor) to 5 (excellent) scale.<sup>7</sup> Using SRH as a proxy for subjective well-being has several advantages. To start, the measurement of self-perceived health is, by its very nature, subjective and encompasses a cognitive aspect of well-being, as it reflects individuals' overall assessment of their quality of life using their personal judgement and criteria (Diener, 1984). Furthermore, the SRH measure is not time limited, as it omits any reference to respondents' age or previous health states. In addition, its general understanding of the concept of *health* includes all relevant dimensions—physical, social, and emotional—of quality of life (Istat, 2016a). For all these reasons, the SRH indicator is considered a robust well-being indicator and widely used in subjective empirical assessments (Diener et al., 1985; Kahneman & Krueger, 2006).

Looking at the SRH indicator's distribution among the sub-groups of childless migrants, non-TNPs, and TNPs, it clearly appears that mean subjective well-being levels differ according to respondents' family statuses (Figure 1). The childless group showed the highest levels of self-rated health (4.25 on average), followed by non-transnational parents (4.18), and then by parents with at least one child in the home country, who consistently reported the lowest subjective well-being

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<sup>7</sup> In the survey, the exact formulation of the question is “Would you say your health is...”. The respondent is then asked to place their evaluation on a scale from 1 to 5, corresponding to the following modalities: Excellent, Very good, Good, Fair, and Poor. The variable was, then, reverse coded to interpret the highest scores as maximum well-being levels.

levels (3.95 on average).<sup>8</sup> The well-being loss associated with transnational parenthood is confirmed also by looking at the SRH indicator's distribution within the male and female sub-populations considered separately.

[FIGURE 1 ABOUT HERE]

**Fig. 1** Mean levels of self-rated health by gender and family status

Source: Own elaborations on Istat Survey on Social condition and integration of foreign citizens 2011–2012.

### ***Modelling strategy***

Health status self-assessments can be influenced by objective living conditions and individual characteristics (Diener, 2009). Hence, we carried out a multivariate regression analysis to test if, other things being equal, being a transnational parent was significantly associated with worse subjective well-being outcomes. Given the ordinal nature of the outcome under consideration, we implemented ordered logistic modelling.<sup>9</sup> Formally, let denote  $x = (x_1, \dots, x_k)$  as the vector of explanatory variables at the individual level  $I$ , with  $i = (i_1, \dots, i_n)$ , where the  $k$  values of  $x$  are said to be the determinants of the observed outcome of interest  $y$ , as per equation (1). For an ordered variable  $y$ , with 1 to  $C$  categories and  $\theta_c$  cutpoints, where  $c = (1, \dots, C - 1)$ , on the underlying latent variable  $y^*$ , we specify the ordered logit model as in (2).

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<sup>8</sup> Significance of differences between groups means was tested via the independent group t-test using Stata 16. Test results are available in the Online Appendix (see Table A1).

<sup>9</sup> All estimates were computed using Stata 16 by means of the *ologit* package.



$$y_i^* = \sum_k x_{ik}\beta_k + \epsilon_i \quad (1)$$

$$P(y_i > c) = \text{invlogit} \left\{ \sum_k x_{ik}\beta_k - \theta_c \right\} \quad (2)$$

where

$$\text{invlogit}(x) = \text{inverse logit function of } x = \frac{\exp(x)}{\{1 + \exp(x)\}}$$

$$\theta_0 = -\infty \quad \text{and} \quad \theta_c = \infty.$$

The literature on migrant well-being finds that higher well-being outcomes are associated with improved socio-economic conditions (Leu et al., 2008), as well as with the experience of a positive social environment in the host country (Dias, Severo, & Barros, 2008; Lebrun, 2008; Oppedal, Røysamb, & Sam, 2004). Therefore, besides the explanatory variable of interest (i.e., *family status*), in the model, we included a large set of independent variables to control for possible confounders. Socio-demographic characteristics are accounted for by respondents' age, gender, origin region, marital status, and area of residence in Italy. Socio-economic conditions are accounted for by migrants' educational level and activity status, distinguishing between those who had a legal job and those who were illegally employed. Migration background is accounted for by the length of stay in Italy, the reason for migration (affective ties, economic reasons, forced migration, and other reasons), and the frequency of visits to the home country. Moreover, a dummy variable for the presence of chronic illness is included in the model to control for objective health conditions.

To verify H1 and H2, the model was first run on the whole sample and then on the subgroups of migrant men and women separately, with the aim of exploring the relationship between

SRH and family status both between and within genders. Specifying different equations for the sub-samples of men and women is conceptually meaningful as it helps emphasize the gendered nature of parenting experiences. A further advantage consists in accounting for possible structural differences in the way male and female populations tend to evaluate their own subjective well-being or life satisfaction levels (Diener, 2009).

The regression analysis was then replicated by re-specifying the family status indicator to control whether transnational parents had minor children (i.e., under the age of 15) in the home country and how that specific feature interacted with their health status self-evaluations (H3).<sup>10</sup> Finally, the last set of models was designed to contrast Eastern European women with migrants coming from other world regions, with the aim of analysing if any difference based on birthplace arise in terms of migrant parents' subjective well-being (H4).

## **Results**

Results from the first set of models are shown in Table 2, which presents the ordered logit estimates for the whole sample of partnered and co-habiting migrants (column A) and for the sub-

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<sup>10</sup> The choice of the threshold of 15 years was dictated by the very low number of transnational parents with small left-behind children. In any case, all estimates presented in the remainder of this article proved to be robust to the specification of different age thresholds (i.e., age 10 and 6), excepting an inevitable reduction of the statistical significance of some of the estimated coefficients.

groups of migrant men and women (columns B and C).<sup>11</sup> Estimates in column A confirm that, other things being equal, being a transnational parent was negatively associated with subjective well-being. Compared to childless migrants, migrant parents with at least one left-behind child were less likely to positively self-evaluate their general health status ( $p$ -value < 0.05). On the other hand, the existence of a parent-child bond *per se* does not seem to make a difference in determining subjective well-being levels, as indicated by the not-significant odds ratio associated with the non-TNP category. Such evidence is robust to the specification of a large set of control factors. The gender variable is not significant in this model, highlighting that being a woman *per se* does not predict suffering from lower SRH. Instead, the origin region is significantly associated with subjective well-being levels: compared to individuals from Eastern Europe and the Balkans, migrants who immigrated to Italy from other world regions—especially MENA countries, Asia, and Sub-Saharan Africa—showed higher probabilities to rate their SRH favorably. Net of the strong association between the presence of chronic illnesses and low SRH levels, socio-economic conditions, too, are particularly significant in shaping migrant subjective well-being levels: compared to the legally employed, individuals who were in illegal jobs or not employed showed

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<sup>11</sup> All results presented in this section are robust to alternative model specifications, such as heteroskedastic ordered modelling (Williams, 2010, 2016), which requires the simultaneous estimation of two equations: one for the determinants of the outcome and another for the determinants of the residual variance aimed at correcting for possible biases due to heteroskedasticity in the error component. In the presence of very similar results, the simplest model specification was chosen for the sake of clarity and parsimony. Results from alternative regression analyses and from any robustness checks are made available, upon request.

lower SRH ratings on the 1–5 scale. Finally, compared to migrants who had at most completed primary school, more educated migrants had higher propensity to evaluate their own well-being better. In particular, those with tertiary degrees were more likely to rate positively their SRH.<sup>12</sup>

Columns B and C show the estimates computed for men and women separately to understand if there are gendered *transnational parenthood effect*. As shown in Table 2, a significant odds ratio is only found within the female group, where transnational mothers were less likely than women with no children to rate their SRH positively ( $p$ -value < 0.05). As in Column A, the well-being level of migrant mothers living with their children in Italy is not statistically different from the other two family statuses. Hence, it seems reasonable to affirm that transnational mothers' lower SRH levels depended solely on the caregiving practice at a distance. Men's subjective well-being, on the contrary, was not related to their family status, once control factors were considered. Rather, their overall SRH responded mainly to other factors—namely, the presence of a chronic illness, strongly linked to SRH levels for both men and women, and socio-economic conditions in Italy, including migrant men's activity status (those who were in illegal jobs or unemployed were worse off compared to legally employed migrants) and especially their educational level (the probability of reporting high SRH levels considerably increased along with the educational level). In sum, although our findings do not allow us to draw conclusions in terms

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<sup>12</sup> Further analyses (not shown here and available upon request) including an interaction term between family status and migrants' age reveal that, in addition to a general decrease of SRH levels over the life course, among transnational mothers, there was a considerable age range—between 25 and 45 years old—when SRH levels were significantly lower than for non-TNPs and childless women.

of comparison between men and women, it is possible to affirm that while transnational motherhood is linked to significantly higher probability of reporting lower subjective well-being levels compared to childless migrant women, the same relation cannot be established for transnational fathers.

[TABLE 2 ABOUT HERE]

Odds ratio from models rerun with the additional control for the presence of a minor left-behind child (under the age of 15) are graphically shown in Figure 2.<sup>13</sup> The plot highlights that transnational mothers with children aged 15 or older showed lower probabilities to rate their SRH favorably on the 1–5 scale, while no significant result could be inferred for women with at least one left-behind child aged up to 14 years old. However, this result is likely linked to the very low number of women belonging to the latter category. Although the limited number of observations does not allow us to establish whether mothering from afar in the presence of young children further deteriorated transnational mothers' subjective well-being, the overall evidence that motherhood at a distance is associated with worse SRH outcomes is confirmed and validated by the data. On the other hand, non-TNPs did not show significantly lower subjective well-being levels, as already ascertained by results drawn from the simplified version of the model. Again, no significant result was found for men in terms of association between subjective well-being and family status.

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<sup>13</sup> See Table A2 in the Online Appendix for the complete set of estimates from models D and E, including the additional control accounting for left-behind children's age.

By the same token, the last set of results were generated by rerunning the models and separating the female sub-populations of Eastern Europeans, on the one hand, and migrant women from other world regions, on the other. Figure 3 shows the graphic representation of the odds ratios estimates for the two groups. Among Eastern Europeans, transnational mothers with children aged 15 and older were less likely to rate their SRH as excellent or very good, compared to childless migrants. No significance was found for women from the same sub-population with minor children or among migrant parents who lived with their offspring in Italy. Such evidence is in line with previous research carried out by Tosi (2020) on the well-being of both married and single Eastern European women living in Italy, which finds that transnational mothers suffer from lower subjective well-being according to the analysis of twelve mental and physical health indicators. Finally, looking at the plot's right-hand side, it is clear that women who immigrated to Italy from other world regions did not show significant differences in terms of SRH on the basis of family status.<sup>14</sup>

[FIGURE 2 ABOUT HERE]

**Fig. 2** Odds ratios of first-generation male and female immigrants' subjective well-being with additional control for the presence of minor left-behind children (ordered logit estimates)

Notes: Bands are 95% confidence intervals. All controls applied.

Source: Own elaborations on Istat Survey on Social condition and integration of foreign citizens 2011–2012.

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<sup>14</sup> See Table A3 in the Online Appendix for the complete set of estimates from models F and G run on the sub-populations of Eastern European women and migrant women from other world regions separately.

[FIGURE 3 ABOUT HERE]

**Fig. 3** Odds ratios of first-generation female immigrants' subjective well-being with control for the presence of minor left-behind children by origin region (ordered logit estimates)

Notes: Bands are 95% confidence intervals. All controls applied.

Source: Own elaborations on Istat Survey on Social condition and integration of foreign citizens 2011–2012.

## **Conclusions and Discussion**

As explained by Parreñas (2015), international migrants create transnational families to maximize resources and opportunities in the global economy to be shared among household members, who maintain a sense of collective responsibility for one another's well-being. Such behavior is common among migrant parents who sustain their left-behind children's livelihoods across international borders. However, how migrant well-being is affected by relationships of care across borders represents an understudied area in the quantitative social sciences. In Italy in particular, such investigation is unprecedented.

This article examined the subjective well-being of first-generation immigrants currently residing in Italy with at least one left-behind child in the origin country. Our hypotheses focused on understanding whether transnational parenthood was related to lower migrant subjective well-being according to gender, family composition, and migration background and whether such relationships were significantly mediated by individual characteristics and migrants' living conditions in Italy. The empirical analysis relied on ordered logit regression modelling to individual-level data on a sample of cohabiting migrant partners, provided by the Istat Survey on Social condition and integration of foreign citizens, 2011–2012. Findings confirmed our first

hypothesis about a *transnational parenthood effect* (H1), revealing that transnational parents in Italy were more likely to suffer from lower levels of subjective well-being as measured by the self-rated health indicator. The significance and direction of such a negative association held after controlling for several possible confounders related to individual characteristics, socio-economic conditions, and migration background, including the number of annual visits to the home country.

Estimates computed separately for migrant men and women ascertained that, other things being equal, men's subjective well-being did not vary based on their family status, while transnational mothers experienced significantly lower well-being compared to childless migrant women. This evidence is in line with the assumptions of our H2 on the existence of a *gender effect* in transnational parenting. Conversely, our findings did not support the *minor children* hypothesis (H3), as model estimates did not allow us to establish that separation from minor children deteriorated parental subjective well-being to a greater extent than separation from adult children. However, this result, which seem to be confirmed for both transnational fathers and mothers, might depend on the limited number of observations included in the category of parents with minor children due to the demographic composition of first-generation immigrants residing in Italy.

Among all control factors considered in our models, the origin region was significantly associated with subjective well-being levels: compared to women who came from Eastern Europe, migrants from other world regions—especially MENA countries, Asia, and Sub-Saharan Africa—showed higher probabilities to rate their SRH favorably. Such evidence interrelates with our fourth hypothesis on *Eastern European mothers* (H4). In fact, models estimated for Eastern Europeans and for women from other world regions separately confirm that transnational parenthood was of concern for Eastern European migrant women in particular.



Recalling the evidence from the qualitative literature on transnational families, at both the international (Dreby, 2006; Fresnoza-Flot, 2009; Parreñas, 2005, 2015; Schmalzbauer, 2004) and national levels (Ambrosini, 2015; Banfi & Boccagni, 2011; Boccagni, 2010, 2011, 2012; Marchetti & Venturini, 2014; Parreñas, 2015), our findings highlight that the burden of transnational parenthood is strongly gendered, suggesting that the persistence of gender roles in parenting and family care may be at the root of this imbalance. While both migrant women and men usually sustain their children's basic needs through remittances, mothers are also expected to continue providing emotional care from abroad (Parreñas, 2005) and, therefore, usually live the parent-child relationship differently than do fathers.

Due to data limitations and with the explicit aim of comparing migrant men and women with analogous living conditions, we had to restrict our analysis to individuals currently living with their partner. Such a sample selection strategy may have implications in terms of results. In this regard, previous research carried out on migrant women from selected Eastern European countries (Tosi, 2020), among which the incidence of living-alone women tends to be higher compared with other national groups (Impicciatore et al., 2020; Marchetti & Venturini, 2014), reveals that transnational mothers suffer from lower subjective well-being in both the physical and mental health domains, regardless of their living arrangements and marital status. Therefore, the evidence found in our analysis can be extended to Eastern European migrant women, whether they live with a partner or not, while the subjective well-being of unpartnered transnational fathers remains unexplored and requires further investigation, provided the availability of suitable data.

The struggle with the emotional difficulties of transnational family life may improve or worsen, depending on several factors, which also raises relevant policy-related questions. For instance, receiving countries' immigration regimes regulate how easy it is for migrants to fulfil

legal requirements and obtain a long-term residence permit, which, in turn, may affect their ability to travel between the origin and destination countries (Cangiano & Impicciatore, 2015; Fresnoza-Flot, 2009) to visit family. Childrearing arrangements in origin countries also matter. As documented in the transnational family research, migrant parents see their relationships with left-behind children improve when their caregiver is the other biological parent, especially the mother (Nobles, 2011). Unfortunately, the data at our disposal do not contain such an information, leaving us without the needed evidence to assess the effect that different kinds of childrearing arrangements might have on migrant subjective well-being. Also, applying a longitudinal perspective to the collection of this kind of data would help examine if and how family care relationships change after migration, and possibly why. Childrearing, as well as other types of arrangements between the migrant and other household members, may change over time, and such changes could affect migrants' perception that their children are being raised properly in their absence (Tizard, 1991). Migrants' marital and relationship statuses themselves should also be monitored over time to be able to relate their variations to different household members' individual well-being conditions (Cebotari & Mazzucato, 2016; Cebotari, Mazzucato, & Appiah, 2018; Cebotari et al., 2017).

In sum, adopting a transnational approach to migration requires greater efforts in terms of data collection and analysis. Statistical sources like the one used in this article, even if conceived in a cross-section survey setting, should be designed *at least* in a retrospective manner so that information on relevant changes that occurred before and after the migration process can be monitored. Although the analysis of international migration and migrant integration has become paramount in Europe recently, such increasing relevance has not been followed by decisive advancements in migration data collection, which is still flawed in many ways (Willekens, Massey,

Raymer, & Beauchemin, 2016). Migration scholars have recently called for a more comprehensive approach in the study of migration and transnational linkages through, for instance, the design and implementation of multi-sited surveys (Beauchemin, 2014). Although costly and methodologically challenging (Beauchemin & González-Ferrer, 2011), adopting a transnational, multi-sited approach to migration data collection would help overcome an immigrant-centric perspective on international migration. At the same time, assessing what factors impact the individual well-being of families divided by international borders via migration, both at the moment of separation and in the future years, would improve general understandings of migrant lives and help inform policy.

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