

## Shifting Geographical Configurations in Migrant Families: Narratives of Children Reunited with their Mothers in Italy

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**Abstract:** The article explores the experiences of separation and reunification by children of migrant mothers in Italy by analysing 32 qualitative interviews conducted with adolescents who had rejoined their mothers at different points in their lives. We show that international migration causes children to face multiple shifts in the configuration of their family ties due to the geographical dislocations and re-locations to which these ties are subject. The way in which children interpret and adjust to these changes depends on factors such as the timing of the family migration process and the frequency of transnational family practices, which are affected by more or less abrupt discontinuities in family life after their mothers' and their own departure.

**Keywords:** Transnational motherhood · Transnational childhood ·  
Family reunification · Female migration

### 1 Introduction

Globalisation and the intensified flows of goods and people across national borders have prompted research on the role played by space in family and intimate life, especially in regard to care and parenting relationships (*Carling et al.* 2012; *Glick* 2010; *Mazzucato/Schans* 2011; *Bonizzoni/Boccagni*, forthcoming). As a significant number of studies have shown, the migratory process often involves repeated and prolonged separations of the members of the extended family as well as of spouses, parents and children (*Boccagni* 2012; *Dreby* 2006; *Fresnoza-Flot* 2009; *Hondagneu-Sotelo/Avila* 1997; *Horton* 2009; *Parreñas* 2005a; *Whitehouse* 2009). Transnational families therefore emerge as a new category of analysis, which further complicates the plurality of contemporary family forms while also confirming the lack of correlation between family and household addressed by most contemporary social research.

As in the case of other important life course events, such as births, deaths, marriages or divorces, migration triggers changes in the family configurations (Widmer 2010) in terms of both household composition and the meanings and relevance of intimate ties (Mason/Tipper 2008). In this regard, particular attention has been paid to the spatial reorganisation of parenting and care (Baldassar *et al.* 2006) as well as to the strategies devised by families to maintain intimacy and affection as well as to exercise discipline and provide support across borders (Baldassar 2001; Gardner/Grillo 2002; Mason 2004; Sutton 2004). Also, the risks that spatial separations may carry both for the well-being of the children in the country of origin and for their integration in that of arrival (Bernhard *et al.* 2009; Cortes 2007; Olwig 1999; Save the Children 2006; Suarez-Orozco *et al.* 2005) were the focus of several research studies.

International migration brings about changes in how family relations are understood and practiced in space, but also in time (Bonizzoni/Boccagni forthcoming; Giral/Bailey 2010). Separations can last for months or years; they may be lived at different “rhythms” (time spent home and away, frequency of visits and telephone calls etc.), by parents and children of very different ages, and who participate in the practices of transnational family life in different ways.

An aspect often underestimated by transnational family research is that separation may only be a temporary phase followed by further geographical reconfigurations of family relations following upon reunification in the home country or return to the foreign country. These patterns have recently been investigated by studies which, often adopting clinical or therapeutic approaches, investigate the effects of these repeated relocations of care relations, emphasising the negative impacts of family separations on the integration of children reunited with their parents (Mitrani *et al.* 2004; Pottinger 2005; Suarez-Orozco *et al.* 2005).

Long-distance parenting and family reunifications are not historically new phenomena: despite the so-called “guest-worker regime”, migrant families did not only use to live apart but also to reunite, even in the earlier waves of migration in Europe (Kraler 2009). Although migrant women have frequently played (and in some cases still play) the role of dependents in family reunification flows, in Southern European countries women now constitute a large share of migrant workers, a fact that raises new issues in regard to both life at a distance and family reunification. Migratory trajectories and long-distance care arrangements are in fact considered particularly critical when the migrants are women, given the greater responsibilities and obligations assigned to them in terms of care (Parreñas 2010). Female migration gives rise to a profound reorganisation in the management of care tasks and entails processes of more or less radical substitution which in most cases involve members of the extended family.

Female-led reunifications are an emerging phenomenon in Italy, where the demand for low-skilled female labour in the domestic sector is increasing due to a growing need for (especially elderly) care, which cannot be satisfied by shrinking public resources and by women caught between competing work and care demands (Ambrosini 2011). Even though domestic (and especially live-in) work may be so demanding in terms of work schedules as to be hardly compatible with one’s

“own” family life (Parreñas 2005a), several immigrant working women manage to put in place mobility strategies which enable them to start family reunification processes.

On the basis of 32 in-depth interviews conducted with children reunited with their mothers who had migrated to find work in Italy, we will investigate how migrant children experience and actively engage in the changes of the geographical configuration of their families. In fact, still little is known about how children participate in negotiations of the family’s migratory path and about how those negotiations are influenced by their own desired geographies of family life (Bushin 2009; Phoenix 2010)

As we shall show, international migration causes children to face multiple shifts in the configuration of their family ties due to the geographical dislocations and re-locations to which these are subject. These changes can be seen not only in the household composition but also in the way family life is concretely practised (Silva/Smart 1999), how tasks are performed by relatives and in the meanings that children attach to their intimate ties (Mason/Tipper 2008).

## 2 Being cared for from afar

Since the pioneering work by Hondagneu-Sotelo and Avila (1997), an increasing number of studies have investigated the consequences of female migration on family relations. The literature emphasises that motherhood at a distance often requires a radical reorganisation of the everyday care given to the children, and that it is simultaneously based on new meanings and everyday practices (Åkesson *et al.* 2012; Parreñas 2005b; Rajman *et al.* 2003).

The mother’s departure entails two different forms of family reorganisation. First of all, mother-child relationships are de-territorialised and simultaneously lived at a distance (Levitt/Schiller 2004) through the deployment of new practices and rituals of family life (Silva/Smart 1999). Telephone calls, visits, gifts and remittances are the most common means by which faraway mothers display (Finch 2007) their love and care. The mothers’ purpose is to maintain a sense of intimacy, to obtain information about the life-conditions of their children and to intervene actively in decisions that concern them. Even if advances in transport (low-cost flights etc.) and communication (mobile telephony, internet etc.) have undoubtedly made the international circulation of money, information and affection more reliable, economical and rapid, a certain number of studies have also reported limitations of and ambivalences in care strategies across borders and over long distances (Baldassar *et al.* 2006; Bernhard *et al.* 2009; Boccagni 2012; Fresnoza-Flot 2009; Horton 2009). Remittances undoubtedly ensure above-average living standards for migrant women’s children, giving them access to better schools, healthcare and housing (Save the Children 2006; Scalabrini Migration Center 2004). However, it has also been pointed out that, although this influx of money “materialises” and makes “visible” the affection and care of the faraway mothers, it is necessary but not always sufficient to guarantee the quality of the care received by the children in the home country. In fact, a great

deal depends on the skills and reliability of the caregivers, as well as on the mother's capacity to organise control from afar (*Tolstokorova 2010*).

It has been shown that the children may suffer an acute sense of loss after the mother's departure (*Pottinger 2005*), and that at the same time a sense of mutual estrangement may develop between parents and children which is only partly mitigated by the practices of family life at a distance (*Bernhard et al. 2009; Parreñas 2001*). The ability of the children to take part in technology-mediated communicative exchanges and to directly communicate their needs significantly depends on their age (*Bonizzoni 2012; Carling et al. 2012*). Moreover, it may be extremely difficult for the parents to simultaneously invest in transnational practices (communications, remittances and journeys) intended to dampen the effects of separation on the one hand and, on the other, in integration processes (savings and investments for return or reunification) intended to end family separation. The efficacy of visits and communications in maintaining the bonds of knowledge, intimacy and affection between parents and children, as well as supervising how children are growing up, can by no means be taken for granted. Home visits, for instance, are often difficult to arrange for mothers in very distant countries, due to travel costs, but also to the frequently undocumented status of women in the first phase of their migratory paths during the first period spent in Italy (*Bonizzoni 2013; Fresnoza-Flot 2009; Schmalzbauer 2004*).

Secondly, mothers' departures also imply a change in family configurations (*Widmer 2010*), in terms of household composition, activities performed by relatives as well as the meanings attached to family ties, because mothers have to involve trustworthy people in supervising their children during their absence. Foster caregivers are often other women (*Åkesson et al. 2012; Hochschild 2000; Parreñas 2010*) who substitute for (or help) fathers who often remain engaged in paid work (at home or abroad). These shifts in care may be more or less drastic for the children: some children are left in the care of people with whom they had already established fond relationships before the mother's departure; others may be forced to move into new households; yet others may even become caregivers themselves. Care arrangements can also change in time, because the children may be reluctant to accept the presence of caregivers and their disciplinary roles, but also because mothers can be required to seek new and not always satisfactory arrangements following unforeseen events (death, illness, ageing, departure of the caregiver).

Because of difficulties in transnational caregiving and the pain of separation – but also because of the desire to secure better school and work prospects for their children – mothers invest heavily in integration projects (regularising, finding a stable job and proper housing) in order to meet the stringent requirements imposed by the immigration law on bringing their families to Italy (*Bonizzoni 2009, 2011*). This process is another major turning-point in the biographies of children's families.

### 3 Remaking intergenerational relationships abroad

Family reunifications have been of a certain interest to clinical or therapeutic studies, which have emphasised the negative impact of separations on the “new” family and social life in the host country (Adams 2000; Artico 2003; Bernhard *et al.* 2009; Falicov 2007; Landolt *et al.* 2005; Pottinger *et al.* 2008; Suarez-Orozco *et al.* 2005). Migrating children are forced to detach themselves from a more or less extensive and meaningful system of affective relations comprising kin, neighbours and peer groups. The sense of estrangement towards the parents abroad that may emerge over time must be confronted in a radically different socio-cultural context. The minors, often experiencing migration on their own, must find ways to integrate into relational spheres – school, friendships, neighbour relationships – often entirely new to them. At family level, the children must once again live with their parents in a new environment, sometimes encountering family members (siblings born in Italy or new partners of their mothers) wholly unknown to them (Horton 2009; Phoenix 2010). Regarding education, they must cope with the effects of interrupted schooling which may hold them back or channel them into the less prestigious circuits of the educational system (Phoenix 2009). The children must then develop all the linguistic and social skills required to establish new friendships in an often stigmatising environment (Smith *et al.* 2004). Many of these studies emphasise the role of age and the duration of separation as factors determining the extent to which migrant children adjust in the new country. Adolescence seems to be a particularly crucial phase, due to the desire for independence common among youths, but also because of the greater difficulties of integration in terms of friendships and education. The issue of the social integration of reunited children is important in terms of policies because some states (for instance Germany) have implemented restrictive immigration policies explicitly raising the issue of the supposed non-integrability of reunited teenagers (Kraler/Kofman 2009).

Few studies, however, pay attention to the role that migrant children actively play in determining the outcomes of reunification and life at a distance, to the changed meanings that they attach to new family configurations and to how they adjust to changing family configurations over time (Bushin 2009; Orellana *et al.* 2001; Phoenix 2010; Dreby 2006; Olwig 1999). Reunifications are not necessarily certain or permanent, and a long-period perspective (covering the time that the migrant children have spent in Italy) may prove useful, as we shall see, in understanding the extent to which these repeated experiences of shifts in care relations affect integration into the new country.

In what follows, we show that international migration causes children to face multiple shifts in the configuration of their family ties due to the geographical dislocations and re-locations to which these ties are subject. The way in which children interpret and adjust to these changes depends on factors such as the timing of the family migration process and the frequency of transnational family practices, which subject them to more or less abrupt discontinuities in their family configurations after their mothers’ and their own departure. Such experiences prove crucial for

understanding how the children would cope with migration and adaptation in the new country.

#### 4 Methods

The following discussion is based on research carried out in Milan between 2006 and 2008.<sup>1</sup> It draws on 32 qualitative semi-structured interviews conducted with reunited teenagers (19 girls and 13 boys aged 14-20) who had experienced physical separation from their mothers due to international migration. Our intention was to select migrant children resident in Italy for a variable number of years who had experienced both separation and reunification at different stages in their lives more or less recently. Interviewees were found with the help of schools<sup>2</sup> and teachers: we asked teachers to signal to us cases of children whom they knew had arrived in Italy quite recently. We asked them to focus on children from those countries in which mothers are usually the first in the family to leave (for instance: The Philippines, Peru, Ecuador, Moldova and Ukraine). Subsequently, we asked the children (and in some cases also their mothers<sup>3</sup>) if they were willing to be interviewed. Interviews were carried out in Italian and they lasted one and a half hours on average; they thoroughly investigated several critical points in the interviewees' migratory experience: separation from their parents (i.e. if they remembered how they felt the day when their mothers left; if they knew where their mothers were going and why), the relationships they established with their substitute caregivers (we asked them to describe changes in their household composition and the relationships with their substitute caregivers); their participation in transnational family practices (what they remembered of their mothers' phone calls, if they received any gifts or money i.a.), the extent to which they took part in negotiations about their own migratory path (how they evaluated the perspective of their own departure), the adjustment to relatives in Italy (how it has been coming back living with their own mothers after the separation, if they felt at ease with her), the relationships that they maintained with the people left abroad (if they still kept in touch with their substitute caregivers), the issues of school and peers. The interview guideline was semi-structured: Accordingly, every child was asked the same questions, but not in the same order because

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<sup>1</sup> For a more detailed discussion of the data collected, see (*Leonini/Rebughini 2010*), *Ambrosini, Bonizzoni, Caneva (2010)*, *Ritrovarsi altrove: famiglie ricongiunte e adolescenti di origine straniera*, Milano, Fondazione ISMU.

<sup>2</sup> Especially technical and vocational schools, the ones at which children of foreign origin are most often enrolled.

<sup>3</sup> Other studies have compared the mothers' and children's perspectives (see for instance *Bonizzoni 2012*).

we preferred not to constrict the interaction too much.<sup>4</sup> The interviews were recorded and transcribed. We then carried out a thematic analysis, identifying key themes, coding the interviews, extracting and clustering quotes: we subsequently selected the most insightful and exhaustive of them as the basis for this article.

The children interviewed came from the countries from which most migrant female workers come to Italy (the majority of mothers were or had been employed in the care and domestic sector): 12 were from Ecuador, 7 from Peru, 5 from the Dominican Republic, 4 from the Philippines, one from Bolivia, one from Colombia, and one Ukrainian and one from Moldova. Almost all of them were enrolled at schools: 20 were in vocational training (shorter programmes for hairdressers, cooks, electricians etc.), 9 in long-term technical training (in subjects such as chemistry, accounting etc.), one was still in compulsory schooling, one was at university, and the remaining 2 were working.

Family configurations were extremely varied and complex because of the multiple intersections between life-cycle events (couple formations and dissolutions, births and deaths) and the family migration path. Fourteen children had both of their parents in Italy: 10 were the children of married couples, 4 of couples divorced

**Tab. 1:** Children's family configurations with respect to parents

<i>Parents in Italy</i>	
Both parents, mother and father	14
Only the mother	18
<i>Parents' marital status</i>	
Married	10
Separated/divorced, both parents are living in Italy	4
Separated/divorced, father abroad, father unknown or dead	18
- Father, living abroad	13
- Father, place of residence unknown	3
- Father dead	2
Parents in a new relationship in Italy	11
- Mother	9
- Father	2
- Mother or father with new Italian partner	7

Source: own data

<sup>4</sup> The interviews explored several sensitive and ticklish issues regarding the children's intimate life: in most cases children actually proved to be quite eager (as it can be grasped by the quotes included in the paper) to openly express their (often ambivalent) feelings regarding their past and current family life. The low numbers of the children interviewed does not allow us to understand whether "overly optimistic" accounts could be attributed to sampling strategies (having been introduced to us by their teachers and in a few cases by their mothers) or reticence to express negative feelings in respect to their parents' choices due to cultural issues.

in Italy. Therefore, a total of 22 children in the sample belonged to female-headed households. Eighteen children had only their mothers in Italy: 13 had their fathers in the country of origin, 3 had never known them and the fathers of the remaining 2 had died. Eleven children had one parent engaged in another relationship started in Italy: in 7 cases, with a partner of Italian origin.

Also, family reunification patterns showed significant variations, with respect to both sequence (who migrates after whom) and timing (length of each separation). Worth mentioning is that in 19 cases, the family reunification required more than one step and entailed repeated separations between family members (mothers, fathers, siblings). As already mentioned, several fathers had not followed their children abroad (parents separated before migration). Only 2 children had migrated together with their fathers. Hence, 12 children had experienced the migration of both parents, who had migrated one after another (in 9 cases after a year or less). Twenty-one children had siblings: In 7 cases, siblings had been reunited at different times, 5 had siblings born in Italy (4 of which were half-siblings) and living with them. Four children still had one brother or sister abroad: one was going to be re-joined quite soon; two siblings had returned to their country of origin after spending a period in Italy; two of the children interviewed had also experienced some months abroad after migrating to Italy, and were lately re-joined again.

Table 2 summarises some background information regarding the timing of the children's family reunifications with mothers, who had in all cases been the first in the family to leave. The second and third columns of the upper part of the table indicate the number of children left and reunited at the ages reported in column one; the second column of the lower part of the table indicates the number of children

**Tab. 2:** Timing of children's reunification with their mothers

Age	Number of children left at the age of...	Number of children reunited at the age of...
1-3	9	1
4-8	12	5
9-13	10	16
14-17	1	10
Total	32	32
Years	Number of children by length of separation in years ...	Number of children by years spent in Italy ...
1-3	13	15
4-8	14	11
9-13	5	6
14-17	0	0
Total	32	32

Source: own data

who had experienced separations, whose length (in terms of years) are reported in column one; the third column indicates the number of children who had spent the number of years reported in column one in Italy.

Furthermore, because of the difficulties experienced by mothers in applying for family reunification provisions, separations were quite long (4 years or more) in more than half of the cases. As a consequence, very few children had rejoined their mothers at an early age (just 6 of them before the age of 8). As we shall show, the duration of the separation, the time when it was experienced (early childhood, teenagehood) and the number of years passed since the event are all crucial factors in understanding the difficulties and outcomes of long-distance family life and integration into the new country. For this reason, when building our sample, we decided to pay significant attention to the timing of relocation processes, assuming that the abovementioned factors (age at which children were left and reunited, after a certain number of years of separation) could lead to shared experiences, despite their different countries of origins.

## 5 Children's perspectives on transnational caregiving relationships

Our study confirms the importance of female kinship networks in the management of childcare at a distance (*Parreñas 2005a*). In only two cases, children had been left with only their fathers; in 10 cases, fathers lived with their children, but they were supported by other female carers (in most cases grandmothers, in two cases paid careworkers, in one case a 16-year-old daughter). Fathers, in fact, continued to have an economic role in the family, either in the country of origin (no father had stopped working at the point of the mother's departure) or by migrating themselves. Overall, maternal grandmothers were those most often enrolled as caregivers, followed by aunts; in a limited number of cases, children had remained in the care of their teenage sisters and paid careworkers.

Children may experience this shift in family configurations as a more or less abrupt change. When the mothers had already been working full-time and were accustomed to managing care with other members of the extended family (as often in the case of female-headed households), this transition tended to be less abrupt. It is therefore evident that management of care relations prior to the mother's departure (imputable to the family structure but also to particular cultural traditions in the country of origin) may be a crucial factor when evaluating the impact of separation (*Åkesson et al. 2012; Coe 2008*). Forms of previously established "extended" care management may make this change in the care situation less traumatic, but geographical distances and prolonged separations radically reduce the time devoted to face-to-face social interactions between mothers and children, as shown in the case of Elizabeth, from the Dominican Republic:<sup>5</sup>

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<sup>5</sup> All quotes are translated from the Italian originals and reproduced in the appendix.

*But you already knew your grandparents well, or was going to live with them a bit traumatic?* (a)

*No. I was already living with them, and then my grandma has always been my mum, because when my mum was pregnant and my father left, it was my grandparents who brought me up, my mum has always worked, in the beginning, however, she worked close to home, she's always been a domestic worker, so sometimes I could go and see her.*

Elizabeth, Dominican. She had been left at the age of 10 and rejoined her mother at 14.

*My grandma took care of me, and I'm as close to her as I am to my mum, I grew really fond of her and I always clung to her. There were my cousins as well, because my uncle and aunt, my mum's brother, had come to Italy in the meantime and left three children, my cousins. That period from two to five was important for me, but I can say that I had another figure, my grandma, who took my mum's place very well, perhaps even better, I don't know, but I've always got along with her very well as well, especially with her. I love her loads, perhaps more than my mum. For her I'd do anything, for my grandma.* (b)

Clara, Ecuadorian. She had been left at the age of 2 and rejoined her parents at 5.

The words of Clara, a teenager of Ecuadorian origin placed in her grandmother's care at the age of only two, show that affective bonds of this kind may still be strong many years after departure. Although Clara had by now spent more than ten years with her "real" mother in Italy (with whom she said she had an excellent relationship), compared with the only three years spent with her grandmother, she recognised the privileged nature of this bond because of its role in what she interprets to have been a delicate phase of her life.

When family migratory chains involve several siblings, care may be managed collectively, so that the children experience new family configurations with respect not only to the caregivers but also to other members of the extended family (cousins, for instance). The interviews often exhibited multiple shifts in the meanings that the children attributed to their intimate relationships (Mason/Tipper 2008): grandmothers and aunts who became *like mothers*, cousins who became *like siblings*, testifying to the profound reconfigurations that the transnational management of care may engender, especially when it is for a longer time-period.

The children did not always have pleasant memories of the period following the mother's departure. This was most frequently the case of children who, already grown, had established a primary bond with the mother, who could not always be successfully replaced by other relatives. Some children expressed their distress through problematic behaviour or acts of rebellion (for instance, refusing to go to school or to do their homework) which the substitute caregivers were not always

able to handle because of resistance against their disciplinary role. This could seriously jeopardise the parents' plans, forcing them to look for new arrangements, or to reconsider their migratory project.

*When I was living with my grandma I stopped going to school because my parents were not there and I didn't feel like going to school. So my aunt got really angry with us and she brought us to her house with my brother... Then we started quarrelling with her and we moved in with her family in another city. Then my brother started fainting, he was feeling very bad, we were worried, they told us it was because he missed my parents... In fact when we came here he stopped having those problems.* (c)

Eulale, Bolivian. She had been left at the age of 14 and rejoined her parents at 15.

*And how did your life change after your mum left?* (d)  
*Well... on the one hand I felt a bit lonely, with my sister. Because... then my father took off...*

*Did he work away from home a lot?*

*Yes he worked... and then he didn't give a toss... as long as I went to school.*

*So if I've understood correctly, your relationship with your mum was a bit different from the one with your dad...*

*Yes, in fact I got lower grades at school...*

*Was that because there was nobody... to take care of you, or because you felt freer, even not to do your homework...*

*Well, yes.*

*Was there anyone else besides your sister and your dad?*

*Yes, there was my grandma, she'd come to live with us after my mum left, my dad's mother.*

*And what was this grandma like?*

*Well... she wasn't strict. Maybe she complained to my father when we did something... she wasn't bad. I didn't like the way she cooked.*

*So my sister and I always went out and about to eat...*

*And how did you find living with your grandma?*

*It didn't bother me much...*

*You did not appreciate her?*

*No, not really.*

*So after your mum left, you had more freedom, for example to go out?*

*Yes, much more.*

*Because the person who controlled you was ...*

*Let's say my father, to not let us feel lonely, right? There was this part of liberation which... how can I put it... then we became too*

*free, and my father couldn't keep hold of us anymore. But... he still didn't care.*

*And... about your departure, did you have time to get used to the idea of leaving? I don't know, did they tell you about it some months beforehand, or was it something sudden?*

*No, they told me three days before.*

*Ah, so close...*

*Yes, because... I had a showdown with my father. Because he was always out, he never came home... so we quarrelled with him.*

*You and your sister?*

*Yes, and also my grandpa, my mother's father, he rang my mum, and she said all right, send them here. And I'd always wanted to be with my mum...*

Vicente, Ecuadorian. He had been left at the age of 11 and rejoined his mother at 14.

The case of Vicente demonstrates that the father's presence is not by itself able to ensure the success of caregiving, especially in the case of conjugal conflict. Entrusted to his grandmother, for whom he felt no particular affection, Vicente reacted to his mother's departure with a sense of "liberation" which led him to neglect his schoolwork and to spend most of his time outside of his home with his sister. Both Eulale and Vicente were soon reunited with their mothers because of problems of this kind, and both of them willingly accepted the idea of leaving to rejoin a mother whose absence they felt strongly. As will be discussed in section 7, the more the children adjusted positively to the "new" family life in the home country, establishing significant relationships with the caregivers, the more the prospect of departure caused suffering and resistance, and the more "care substitution" processes became evident. Practices of distance parenting, in fact, are not entirely able to replicate the mother's position in the family, as discussed in the next section.

## **6 The participation of children in transnational family practices**

During the period of separation, the mothers relied on a series of rituals (*Gardner/Grillo 2002*) to maintain relationships with their children from a distance. Communication (mainly telephone calls, to a lesser extent emails and video calls), visits (although not more than one a year on average), and remittances were the forms in which the mothers expressed interest, concern as well as affection and monitored the caring process from afar. However, it became apparent from the interviews that these strategies had a limited effect on keeping the quality of the relationship unchanged over time, and they should be read in light of the age of the children, as well as the length of the separation.

Telephone calls and visits appeared more effective in preserving memories of the mothers abroad when the children had already been able to establish meaningful relationships with their mothers beforehand. But they proved unsuitable for

developing close relationships with children who had not spent a sufficient number of years with the mother. This is demonstrated by the case of Felicitas, left in her grandmother's care when she was only a few years old.

*Well, when I was a child I didn't even know I had my mum. Because I talked to my aunts, with my grandma, who's almost my mum... When I went to school I discovered I had a mum. But didn't you talk by phone? Yes, but I didn't know that it was my mum, because I was so small when she left me. She also came back every year but I went to school so we didn't have much time to spend together...* (e)  
 Felicitas, Filipina. She had been left at the age of 2 and rejoined her mother at 12.

In these cases, the care shifting process was particularly drastic. Felicitas had never felt the lack of a mother, who, in fact, she only got to know for the first time in Italy. For these children, therefore, it was not so much the delegation of care that was potentially traumatic but the process of reunification with their mothers abroad.

This does not mean, however, that the attitude of children towards their mothers was one of a lack of recognition. As shown by the words of Martin, who had also been left in the care of his grandmother for a long period of time when very young, his mother's concern for his well-being, expressed through the constant sending of remittances and gifts, created a sense of obligation and gratitude which laid the basis for a recognition of motherhood which extended beyond the emotional and relational aspect of the care conventionally associated with it (*Hondagneu-Sotelo/Avila 1997*).

*I mean, my mum is always my mum... she left me when I was one year old, but that was because there was poverty in my village, but she supported me, every month she sent money for me, for school... so that I could eat... then she sent me presents...* (f)  
 Martin, Dominican. He had been left at the age of 1 and rejoined his mother at 13.

In addition, thanks to the level of well-being ensured by the remittances, and to the fact that the absence of the mother was compensated by the presence of significant others, the experiences of transnational care recounted by many of the children were not always marked by the loneliness and sense of abandonment reported by some studies. However, a great deal depended on the timing of the family migration process (age at which the child was left and rejoined), on the frequency of transnational family practices and on the way children experienced the change in family configurations and shifts in care, as recounted in the previous section. The type of transnational experience therefore influenced the way in which the children evaluated the prospect of leaving abroad and negotiation about the migratory path;

negotiation which, as we will discuss in the next session, could be more or less conflictual. Whilst for some children rejoining their mothers was a desirable option because it matched their expectations in terms of care, for others it represented a major change which required radical adjustments in their inner lives – adjustments that sometimes were even more difficult than those experienced after the mother's departure.

## 7 Negotiating the children's departure

At the time of their departures, for the majority of mothers the purpose of their migration was to accumulate money with the prospect of eventually returning home. It was only over the course of time that the conditions necessary for stable settlement came about, and the children therefore realised that it was not their mothers who would return, but they themselves who would have to leave. The children did not always participate fully in negotiations about their migratory path, especially when they were still too young to do so (*Bushin 2009*). However, as they grew, their mothers tended to see them as active subjects and negotiated with them on the matter.

*When did you realise that it was you who'd have to leave?* (g)

*Ah... that was tough, because I had to leave everything, my grandparents, my cousins... And when I left, I remember I felt sad ... even sadder than when my mum had left! And my grandma started crying... it was really awful.*

*So how did you feel about leaving, were you happy?*

*Yes, I was even enthusiastic about getting to know another country, learning another language... The nostalgia, the pain at leaving my grandparents, came later, but just before I left... I was happy.*

*There was never a moment when your mum told you to come and you said no?*

*No, never, even before leaving I remember that she asked me if I was sure that I wanted to come... And then when we were here, she asked me if I regretted it... Do you want to go back, do you want to return... but I've never returned.*

Mariana, Ecuadorean. She had been left at the age of 10 and re-joined her mother at 13.

Mariana's words highlight the ambiguity of feelings which many children expressed at the prospect of leaving: on the one hand, the enthusiasm about discovering a new country and the desire to be with their mothers again; on the other, the necessity to leave behind a system of social and affective relationships established over time. The children's departure entailed separation not only from their relatives but also from friends, school environments and their cities. It was not rare for some of them, especially the teenagers, to resist this prospect of radical change.

*I didn't want to come here, nor did my sister. It was October, the 9th of October 2006, at around eight, I'd gone dancing at a bar with some friends. When I came home I went to bed and I didn't see anything. In the morning I saw all the suitcases ready and off we went, because she [the mother] knew that if she had told me beforehand, I'd have run away to my father.* (h)

*So she didn't tell you?*

*No, then she got my aunt, her aunt to come from the USA to convince us to come.*

Carolina, Dominican. She had been left at the age of 11 and rejoined her mother at 14.

*And then coming here, what was it like?* (i)

*Ah (laughs)... bad, bad...*

*What was it that...*

*Ah, first the fact that it was lies that got me here... my mum and dad told me that they'd brought me here for a holiday, but then I'd go back, so I came thinking I'd be here for only a short while...*

*And if they'd immediately told you that you had come to stay, what do you think you'd have said?*

*Ah... I certainly wouldn't have wanted it... but I'd have done it anyway. I'd have done it anyway because it's what they say that counts, not what I say.*

Lorena, Ecuadorean. She had been left at the age of 9 and rejoined her parents at 13.

Resistance by children was difficult to handle for the parents, who sometimes resorted to "half truths" or "negotiated" the departure on certain conditions. For example, some children gained the "concession" that they could complete their schooling in the home country; others were offered a holiday as a sort of "trial period", on conclusion of which they would be free to choose whether to stay or not. Family reunification, therefore, was not a straightforward process. Although almost all of the children interviewed had accepted the prospect of settling permanently in Italy, some of them had siblings who had refused to leave or who had returned to the home country after some time in Italy. These processes should be viewed in light of the adjustments that the children had been obliged to make in both the country of origin and Italy; adjustments which differed greatly according to age, particular experiences of transnational family life and the relations that the children had been able to maintain, but also to recreate over time, with their mother abroad.

## 8 Family and intimate relations in Italy: discontinuities and new beginnings

The migrating children were forced to cope with radical changes in all spheres of their everyday lives, from family to friendships, to school.

Consequently, the first period spent abroad was particularly difficult, even for those children who had wanted to leave most. Not always fully aware of what awaited them, the children had to familiarise themselves with a new reality while at the same time coping with the loss of what they had left behind – a loss that takes on different connotations according to the particular experience of separation.

For the children left in the care of other relatives at a very young age or for a longer period of time, living with the mother sometimes was an entirely new experience because they had no memories of the period prior to her departure (*Phoenix* 2010).

*When I came here I was quite happy because she was my mum... but I also felt I didn't know who she was, she was like a stranger to me. When we talk she tells me that some things had happened which were quite painful for her. At the beginning we were a bit distant, I drew back when she wanted to hug me... then, step by step, we have partly overcome that, but at that time for me it was something instinctive, I held back from doing some things because it was a long time since we had been together. Now they see us in the street and they tell us we look like sisters, we have a beautiful relationship. We've needed some time.* (j)

Jenny, Ecuadorian. She had been left at the age of 6 and rejoined her mother at 13.

*At the beginning, I was really happy because I could see my mum again after all those years... but then... I expected my mum to be different... as time passed I saw that she was not like I had imagined... and then I don't call my mum "mum", I call her by her name. I imagined I'd find... but then... life here is monotonous, she always has to go to work, even on Saturdays and Sundays... I see the mothers of my schoolmates... the mum of my friend is a real mum... because she worries about her daughter, she helps her, she calls her every day to hear how she is... my mum calls me hardly twice a week. When she gets home from work, we never talk... because in the evenings she still has to work as a cleaner in a garage ... so we don't communicate much... we're not on the same wavelength.* (k)

Marisol, Peruvian. She had been left at the age of 7 and rejoined her mother at 15.

The children were very often unclear about the rhythms and lifestyles of their mothers, as from abroad, the latter did not always involve them in these aspects of

their lives. Girls like Marisol expressed high care expectations following their past experiences but also on what they observed around them; expectations unlikely to be satisfied in this migratory context.

However, the accounts of the children about how intimacy had been regained with their mothers varied greatly in terms of times and outcomes. Girls like Kimberly and Carolina, who had rejoined their mothers at a relatively advanced age after a period of rather brief separation, did not remember the transition as particularly problematic: Their mothers had already been significant figures for them before departure. And over time, they were able to prevent estrangement with intense and active involvement in distance communication.

*When you arrived here, what was it like living with your mum again after not seeing each other for such a long time?* (l)

*Ah... at the beginning it was a bit difficult, right. But then we got used to it...*

*Do you remember any conflicts or embarrassment?*

*Well, perhaps some embarrassment at the beginning, yes, but it didn't last very long...*

*So you don't remember it as particularly difficult?*

*No, no.*

Kimberly, Colombian. She had been left at the age of 9 and rejoined her mother at 12.

*And what was it like, living with your mum again?* (m)

*Ah... seeing her again was wonderful... although everything was completely different because, as I told you, my mum has always worked, and so it was never my mum who told me "do this", "do that", it was my grandma who cooked. It was completely different. It was her who told me to get up, make the bed, and then we'd eat together, it was really... it was wonderful.*

Carolina, Dominican. She had been left at the age of 11 and rejoined her mother at 14.

In other cases, the process was more complicated and required greater effort and more time. Nadia, for instance, had been separated from her mother for five years, and after rejoining her (at the age of 12) had felt a lack of knowledge and trust in her which she said had harmed their family life for a certain period. The care needs of the children, therefore, were relative not only concerning the time that the mothers spent with them but also concerning the quality of communication and the level of trust and mutual knowledge, which was partly affected by distance. According to Nadia, the telephone calls between her mother and her had not been enough to maintain a "real" relationship, which therefore had to be revived in Italy.

*She left first and came here, and left us there, right? So it's not that we had a relationship... I mean, I couldn't remember the things that* (n)

*we did when we were there, because I was too little. And the whole time she was here, on her own, we didn't have a relationship, right? So the thing is... the result is, that we can't really talk, tell each other things. For instance if I like someone, I find it difficult, first more, now it's getting better, also my sister ...*

*But were you (your sister and you) a little bit angry because she had left you behind, or...?*

*No, no, it wasn't like that, we didn't feel hurt because she had left us, no, it wasn't like that, she'd gone because she had to. Then it's not that she had gone away and forgotten us, that she didn't speak to us, that she didn't call us, no. In fact, if we're here, if we're still studying, and if we studied there, it's because of my mum, so I don't feel resentful... it was only a habit, because I didn't have much confidence in her, I couldn't do it... but now it's getting better.*

Nadia, Ecuadorian. She had been left at the age of 7 and rejoined her mother at 12.

As Nadia's words show, transnational practices (telephone calls and remittances, for instance) were useful for averting the risk that the mother's departure might be interpreted as "abandonment" (in fact, none of the children felt that they had been "abandoned" by their mothers). But they were insufficient in maintaining the bond of intimacy between mothers and children, and this "gap" in intimacy and reciprocal knowledge tended to become evident when the children migrated abroad.

In some cases, even after many years in Italy, the children continued to identify the caregiver left behind in the home country as their principal affective referent, with whom they continued to maintain extremely significant bonds at a distance. For Antonio, a Dominican boy who had experienced early and long separation from his "second mother", she was still his main affective referent. He felt his aunt was the one who knew him best, who knew best how to support him, and with whom he felt a bond equivalent to a "true" maternal relationship. This does not mean that Antonio's biological mother was irrelevant to him: Quite contrary, he held her in high regard and respected her. He was deeply grateful for the efforts that she had made for him, but it was evident that the two figures were not replaceable, but rather complementary, in that they could offer different things.

*I call her (the aunt living in the Dominican Republic) even two or three times a week, sometimes I'm cheerful, really cheerful, other times I try to be cheerful but can't manage it, and so she says "what's the problem?". I don't tell her anything, I don't tell her, but as soon as she gives me two or three words of advice, I feel better. Like my mum here, I love her, I love her very much. When my mum here, my real mum, gives me some advice I take it... but it doesn't raise my spirits like the advice from the one down there. It's a completely different thing. I slept in the same bed with the one in Santo Domingo until I was seven. I don't have the same intimacy with the* (o)

*one here, even if I don't see the one in Santo Domingo every day, I've seen her only for four months when I went back after I'd been here for five years, but for me it was the same as when I was little, and still now it's the same thing when I go back. Instead, I don't have the same confidence in my real mum here, neither in speaking nor reacting. At the beginning, I felt sad because I couldn't see my mum in Santo Domingo every day, my mum here helped me to get over it, she did everything so that I felt better, she gave me so very, very, very much. She did everything to let me have what I wanted if it wasn't something that was too much of a hassle to get for me. If it was something that she thought I shouldn't do, that I shouldn't have, she said no.*

Antonio, Dominican. He had been left at the age of 1 and rejoined his mother at 9.

However, the accounts of the children often wavered ambivalently between gratitude towards their mothers for their efforts (in paying for their studies or giving them the chance to migrate) and accusations of an inadequate emotional “performance” more or less irreparably compromised by distance (Parreñas 2010). This accusation tended to be used in situations of conflict, as if only intimacy could legitimate the exercise of authority.

*At the beginning I was quite angry towards her (the mother) because she was criticising me for the things I did, for the way I grew up... For instance, I was unable to do household chores because my grandma did everything, and my mum was saying “but didn't your grandma teach you anything?” But she can't criticise my grandma, because she was the one who brought me up while my mum didn't see me in my childhood and my teenage years. [...] On the one hand I think that I would have died without the money she sent, but on the other hand I also think that she can't criticise me because she has never been with me.* (p)

Marisol, Peruvian. She was left at the age of 7 and rejoined her mother at 15.

*She sometimes says that we never listen to her, and I go nuts. I tell her I never saw her for four years and I'm used to doing it this way. And she comes and starts yelling “do this”, “do that” ... but then in the end I do what she tells me... And what does she say? That it's not her fault because she did it for our own good... that if you want one thing you must sacrifice another... And do you think she did it for you?* (q)

*Yes, in the end here I have more things... also there I had my friends but there was no possibility to go to work, at sixteen you can do nothing ... while here I can do all the things.*

Loris, Ukrainian. He was left at the age of 8 and rejoined his mother at 12.

As the case of Loris shows, even the children who recognised the advantages of migrating abroad, and who therefore did not regret leaving the home country, sometimes still blamed their mothers for having been “absent”. Tensions of this kind obviously tended to be more complex when the children did not (yet) appreciate the outcomes of their migration. Just like the adaptation to the mother, the adjustment to the new country also followed a largely common pattern, with an initial desire to return to the home country followed by the acceptance of the migratory path. It was a pattern, however, whose timing varied greatly from case to case.

## **9 From the desire to return to the desire to stay: changes in the migratory path in the eyes of the children**

The majority of the children interviewed remembered the early period spent in Italy as marked by a more or less intense desire to return. This desire was stronger, the greater the disappointment with Italian reality, and the more intense the bonds with those left behind in the home country.

In two cases, the parents had decided to give in to their children and let them go back to the home country for some months. But then the children returned to Italy (once and for all, they said). In both cases, these were children whose experience of separation from their caregivers had been rather traumatic, and in both cases the return followed a crisis (educational and relational) shortly after arrival in the new country. In both cases, the purpose of these processes of “transnational disciplining” (Orellana *et al.* 2001) was to develop the children’s greater awareness of the opportunities available in the two countries, and thus gain their agreement with the parent’s choice.

*I soon quit school, when I’d finished middle school, because I’d returned to Santo Domingo and didn’t want to come back [to Italy]. I mean, at the beginning I didn’t want to go, I went there and I didn’t want to return [to Italy], but after not even three or four months I did want to return, I couldn’t stand it there any longer. Because life there is different from what it is here. During the first months you are fine, you see your friends again, I went here and there, but after a while I said to myself this isn’t the life that I want, I could never find a job here like I could in Italy. So I came back here, and as soon as I was back I started to work, I mean, at the age of fifteen I started working. Now that I’m here I’m happy to be here. To tell the truth, I’d only go to Santo Domingo for holidays, because by now I’ve spent* (r)

*most of my life here. I spent nine years in Santo Domingo but I've been here for ten. I preferred to come here to make a future and only go there for holidays.*

Antonio, Dominican. He was left at the age of 1 and rejoined his mother at 9.

As the case of Antonio shows, this maturing process, centred around a project of emancipation and growth, may begin at a very early age. Acceptance of migration as an ambivalent process which takes time and is described in terms of maturing or inner growth, and therefore of improvement, is a feature that emerged from numerous other interviews as well. This was evidently a strategy that the children adopted to make sense of the many and often painful losses which migration entails. In fact, only one of the girls interviewed (who had rejoined her mother less than one year previously) declared that she wanted to return to her country of origin because she was disappointed with her experience of life in Italy. In all the other cases, therefore, the children had been able to develop positive forms of adaptation to their new reality.

## 10 Conclusions

In this article we have sought to provide an interpretation of how children who rejoin their mothers abroad experience the diverse family geographical configurations produced by international migration. And we have tried to highlight the active role that they play in this process. It has often been claimed that transnational motherhood is based on new meanings and practices (such as phone calls, home visits, remittances...), although to date these have predominantly been investigated from the standpoint of the mother. Yet, the voices of the children are crucial for understanding not only the effectiveness of transnational family practices in reproducing intimacy at a distance but also how the family migration process impacts on the meanings that children attach to changed family geographies and belongings.

The study has shown that migration is a crucial process that induces families to change their configurations (*Widmer 2010*) in terms of household composition, chores performed by family members, responsibilities assigned to relatives, and the meanings that individuals attribute to their intimate ties (*Mason/Tipper 2008*). Female work migration heightens the importance of extended family ties because fostering care arrangements are needed for sometimes very long periods of time and on wide geographical scales.

The changing geographies of family life can be experienced more or less traumatically by children, depending on a range of factors. In particular, the age at which the children were left behind and reunited, the duration of separations and the involvement of extended family ties prior to the mothers' departure are critical for understanding the different experiences that the children interviewed recalled in terms of both transnational caregiving and family reunification abroad. Transnational family practices seem more efficient in the case of brief separations experienced

by children who had already been able to establish solid relationships with their mothers prior to departure. On the contrary, children left at a very early age in the care of other relatives soon tend to develop a sense of estrangement which cannot effectively be countered by telephone calls and temporary visits.

Whilst some children (especially the older ones, almost exclusively cared for by their mothers in infancy and left with people of little significance to them) had indeed experienced the separation as marked by a care deficit, others (especially those left behind when very young and/or for long periods of time with significant family figures) had developed relationships with their caregivers entirely comparable to those with a mother. This type of experience proved crucial for understanding how the children would cope with migration and adaptation in the new country. Far from being some sort of “baggage” (children whose migratory paths are predetermined by the will of their parents, *Orellana et al.* 2001), children express specific orientations and desires in terms of geographical family configurations. These can be more or less coincidental with those of their caregivers, and they should be understood in light of family configurations which have been more or less radically altered by the migration process.

The children who had suffered most from the separation from their mothers and from temporary transfer to the care by people with little significance to them, tended to consider the prospect of departure as less problematic than did those who had been cared for by truly “second mothers”. The latter children remembered the experience of separation from their caregivers as the most traumatic loss in their migratory path, and they tended to express stronger opposition to the idea of departure. However, this does not mean that the figure of the biological mother was irrelevant to these children. Also children with radical experiences of estrangement held their mothers in high regard and felt a profound sense of gratitude towards them for their support from both afar and in Italy, even though they did not play the role of their most relevant affective referents. Consequently, it would be wrong to claim that experiences of transnational motherhood are accompanied by a break in family relationships, by a lack of recognition of maternal figures and by a loss of solidarity and cohesion. Rather, they can be characterised by a changed conception of motherhood founded more on providing than on emotional intimacy and by a complementarity set of more maternal figures. However, the experience of such a different kind of motherhood is somewhat ambivalent, as evidenced by the accusations of inadequacy sometimes made by several children against their biological mothers. These accusations tended to be made in situations of conflict as strategies intended to delegitimise the authority exercised by biological mothers in Italy. Interestingly, they were made by children from very different countries – from Peru to Ukraine – and even by children who declared that they had actually received good care while their mothers were abroad. Normative constructs of motherhood that emphasise the weight of “being there” could therefore furnish symbolic material on which the children could draw to handle conflicts, which are quite often driven by the difficult experiences of integration experienced in Italy, as well as by the pain that most of them suffered in leaving loved ones behind. Inevitably, once children are in Italy, they compare their experiences of care and being “mothered”

with those received from their caregivers as well as with the experiences of the children around them – something which induced some of them to express criticisms in this regard.

A long-period approach which considers the time that mothers and children had spent apart, but also together in the new country, gives a new perspective on the impact of separations on the adaptation by children when they rejoin their mothers (*Phoenix* 2010). Over time, many of the children studied had been able to (re) build a sense of mutual knowledge, trust and affection with their mothers and to establish the intimacy which transnational practices had failed to maintain. Even for the children whose principal affective referents continued to be the caregivers left in the home country, the prospect of experiencing a shared migratory path, as well as their integration prospects (in terms of schooling, work and willingness to reside Italy), were not thwarted. However, for all the children interviewed (even those most eager to leave), reunification was initially a moment fraught with challenges and ambivalences, between desires to stay or to return which were more or less radical according to the type of separation experienced. The fact that the majority of the interviewees did not regret their departure, but instead interpreted it in light of a maturing process founded on an increasing capacity to appreciate the best (essentially economic) opportunities available in Italy, should be interpreted in terms of the different meanings that care relationships assume over the life course. For these children, the choice between remaining in Italy or returning to the country of origin was not determined solely by the desire to be close to those considered their principal caregivers. It was also determined by a desire to gain emancipation and independence, to take responsibility for one's own fate and to create concrete opportunities for the future.

In summary, our study shows that a mother's migration can radically challenge the correlation of family and household even in regard to the members of the nuclear family. International migration is a process that induces family configurations to change in terms of both household composition and the meanings of the ties and tasks assigned to relatives. The need to share the children's care with other female relatives heightens the importance of the extended family, giving rise to multiple ways of being mothered and cared for which can be better appreciated drawing on children's views as they change in time and space.

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## Appendix

### Shifting Geographical Configurations in Migrant Families: Narratives of Children Reunited with their Mothers in Italy

- (a) *Invece i tuoi nonni tu già li conoscevi bene, o è stato un po' traumatico andare a vivere da loro?*  
*No... io già vivevo lì con loro e poi mia nonna è sempre stata mia madre, perché quando mia mamma è rimasta incinta e mio padre se ne è andato quelli che mi hanno fatto crescere a me sono stati i miei nonni, mia mamma ha sempre lavorato, prima lavorava però vicino a casa mia, mia mamma è sempre stata una domestica, così io qualche volta andavo a trovarla...*
- (b) *Mia nonna mi ha tenuto ed io mi sono legata a lei come fosse mia mamma, mi sono affezionata tantissimo e le stavo sempre attaccata, c'erano anche i miei cuginetti perché anche i miei zii, il fratello di mia mamma, erano venuti in Italia nel frattempo ed avevano lasciato tre cugini i tre loro figli. Quel periodo da 2 a 5 anni è importante comunque, però posso dire che ho avuto un'altra figura che è quella di mia nonna che ha saputo sostituirla molto bene, anche meglio forse non lo so, però sono stata molto bene anche con lei, cioè soprattutto con lei, io le voglio un casino di bene, forse più bene che a mia mamma. Per lei farei di tutto, per mia nonna.*
- (c) *Quando stavo con mia nonna non andavo più a scuola, perché non c'erano i miei genitori e non avevo più voglia di andare a scuola. Così mia zia si è arrabbiata e mi ha portato da lei con mio fratello. Poi mia zia ha incominciato ad arrabbiarsi e mi ha portato in un'altra città dove viveva con la famiglia. Lì mio fratello cominciava a svenire, stava male, ci ha fatto preoccupare, la mancanza dei genitori, ci hanno detto... una volta che siamo arrivati qua non ha avuto più problemi.*
- (d) *E com'è che è cambiata la tua vita, dopo la partenza di tua mamma?*  
*Mah... da un lato mi sentivo un po' solo, con mia sorella. Perché... mio padre poi prendeva e se ne andava...  
Lavorava tanto fuori casa?  
Sì lavorava... e poi non gliene fregava tanto, cioè... a lui bastava che io andavo a scuola.  
Quindi il rapporto che avevi con tua mamma mi pare di capire che era un po' diverso da quello che avevi con tuo papà...  
Sì, infatti i voti mi si sono abbassati...*

*Ma perchè, perchè non c'era più nessuno che ti... curasse, perchè ti sentivi più libero, magari di non fare i compiti...*

*Eh sì.*

*Quindi oltre a tua sorella e a tuo papà c'era qualcun altro?*

*Sì, c'era mia nonna, era venuta a vivere lì dopo che mia mamma era partita, la mamma di mio papà.*

*E com'era questa nonna?*

*Mah... non era severa. Magari si lamentava con mio padre quando facevamo qualcosa però... non era cattiva. Non mi piaceva come cucinava. Per quello anche io e mia sorella eravamo sempre in giro, a mangiare fuori...*

*E come è stato ritrovarsi a vivere con tua nonna...*

*Non è che me ne fregava molto...*

*Non la consideravi granchè?*

*No, non proprio.*

*Ma dopo che tua mamma è partita il tuo grado di libertà, ad esempio nell'uscire, così, è aumentato?*

*Sì, molto.*

*Perchè quindi quella che vi controllava era...*

*Diciamo che mio padre per non farci sentire soli, no? C'era quella parte di liberazione che... che noi l'abbiamo, come ti posso dire... che poi siamo diventati troppo liberi, e mio padre non ce la faceva più a tenerci. Però lui... continuava a fregarsene.*

*E... per quanto riguarda la tua partenza, hai avuto modo di prepararti all'idea di partire, non so, te lo hanno anticipato qualche mese prima o è stata una cosa improvvisa?*

*No, me lo hanno detto tre giorni prima.*

*Ah, così rapidamente...*

*Sì, perchè... praticamente è successo un casino con mio padre.*

*Dato che era sempre fuori, non tornava mai a casa... allora abbiamo litigato con lui.*

*Tu e tua sorella?*

*Sì, e anche mio nonno, il padre di mia madre, ha telefonato a mia madre e così lei ha detto va bene, allora mandali di qua. E anch'io ho sempre voluto stare con mia madre...*

- (e) *Beh, io quando ero piccola non sapevo che avevo mia madre. Perché io comunque parlavo sempre con le mie zie, con mia nonna, mia nonna è quasi mia madre... Poi quando sono andata a scuola, ho scoperto che avevo una madre.*

*Ma quindi non la sentivi neanche per telefono?*

*Sì, però non sapevo che era mia madre perché ero tanto piccola quando mi ha lasciata, poi ogni anno tornava, però io andavo a scuola e quindi, cioè il tempo per stare insieme non ce lo avevamo.*

- (f) *Cioè, mia mamma è sempre mia mamma... mi ha lasciato quando avevo 1 anno ma perché c'era povertà al mio paese, mi manteneva, mi mandava tutti i mesi i soldi per me, per la scuola... per mangiare... poi mi mandava i regali...*
- (g) *E quando invece hai capito che saresti stata tu a dover partire?  
Eh... questo è stato più duro, perchè ho dovuto lasciare tutto, i miei nonni, i miei cugini... E quando io poi sono partita mi ricordo che sentivo la tristezza... di più di quando è partita mia madre! E mia nonna si è messa a piangere.. è stato brutto, veramente.  
E quindi come te la vivevi la faccenda di partire, eri felice?  
Sì, ero anche entusiasta, di conoscere un altro paese, di imparare un'altra lingua... La nostalgia, il dolore di lasciare i miei nonni, così è venuto dopo, appena prima di partire, però... ero felice.  
Quindi non c'è stato mai un momento in cui quando tua mamma ha detto vieni tu hai detto no...  
No, assolutamente, anche prima di partite mi ricordo che me lo aveva chiesto sei sicura se ti va di venire... E ancora poi quando eravamo qua, mi chiedeva se mi ero pentita... Vuoi tornare, vuoi tornare... ma io non sono mai tornata.*
- (h) *Io qui non ci volevo venire e neanche mia sorella... Era ottobre, il 9 ottobre 2006, praticamente alle otto io sono andata a ballare ad un pub con alcuni amici, quando sono tornata a casa mi sono messa a letto e non ho visto niente, al mattino ho visto tutte le valigie pronte e sono partita, perché lo sapeva che se me lo diceva io scappavo da mio padre.  
Quindi non te lo ha detto?  
No, ha fatto venire mia zia, sua zia, dagli Usa per farci convincere a venire.*
- (i) *E poi per te venire di qui com'è stato?  
Eh (ride)... brutto, brutto...  
Cos'è che...  
Eh, intanto il fatto che io sono arrivata qui con le bugie... mia madre e mio padre mi hanno detto che mi portavano qui per fare una vacanza, ma che sarei ritornata, io venivo qui pensando che sarei rimasta per poco...  
E se ti avessero detto subito che venivi per rimanere che cosa pensi che avresti detto?  
Eh... non avrei voluto, sicuramente... però l'avrei fatto lo stesso. L'avrei fatto lo stesso perchè comunque è quello che dicono loro che conta, mica quello che dico io.*

- (j) *Quando sono arrivata un po' ero felice perché era mia mamma... ma un po' sentivo di non riconoscerla, mi sembrava una persona strana. Quando parliamo lei mi dice che sono successe cose che le hanno fatto un po' male. Quando sono arrivata eravamo un po' distanti, io mi tiravo indietro dai suoi abbracci... Poi a poco a poco abbiamo recuperato, ma era istintivo, mi trattenevo da fare certe cose, perché era tanto che non stavo con lei. Adesso ci vedono per strada e dicono che sembriamo sorelle, abbiamo una bellissima relazione. C'è voluto tempo.*
- (k) *All'inizio ero felicissima perché dopo tutti questi anni potevo vedere mia madre... ma poi... mi aspettavo che mia madre fosse diversa... con il passare del tempo ho visto che non era come mi immaginavo... e poi la mia mamma non la chiamo proprio mamma la chiamo con il suo nome. Io mi immaginavo di trovare... ma poi la vita qua è monotona deve sempre andare al lavoro, anche al sabato e alla domenica...io vedo anche le mamma delle mie compagne di scuola... la mamma della mia amica è proprio la mamma per me...perché si preoccupa della figlia, l'aiuta, tutti i giorni la chiama per sapere come sta... Mia mamma mi chiama a malapena due volte alla settimana, quando arriva a casa dal lavoro allora non parliamo mai. Alla sera deve lavorare ancora in un officina a pulire e quindi non abbiamo molta comunicazione, non c'è molta sintonia.*
- (l) *Quando poi sei arrivata qua, com'è stato tornare a vivere con tua mamma dopo tanto tempo che non vi vedevate?  
Eh... all'inizio è stato un po' difficile, no? Però poi ci siamo abituate...  
Ti ricordi conflitti, o imbarazzo?  
Mah, forse un po' di imbarazzo all'inizio sì, però non è durato tanto...  
Quindi non te la ricordi come una cosa difficile?  
No, no...*
- (m) *E come è stato quindi tornare a vivere con tua mamma?  
E... rivederla è stato bellissimo... anche se poi era tutto diverso, perché mia mamma come ti ho detto ha sempre lavorato, e quindi mai è capitato che era mia mamma che mi diceva fai questo fai quello, era mia nonna che cucinava. Era tutto diverso. Era lei che mi diceva alzati, devi sistemare il letto, e poi si mangiava tutti e due insieme era proprio... era bellissimo.*
- (n) *Lei è partita per prima ed è venuta qua e ci ha lasciato di là no? Quindi non è che avevamo un rapporto... cioè io non mi ricordavo delle cose che facevamo quando eravamo di là, perché ero picco-*

*la... E tutto il tempo che lei è stata qua, da sola, non avevamo un rapporto, no? E quindi, questa cosa... i frutti sono questi, cioè che non riusciamo proprio magari a parlare, a raccontarsi, ad esempio se a me piace qualcuno, trovo difficoltà, prima di più, ora già un po' meglio, anche mia sorella...*

*Ma eravate magari un po' arrabbiate con lei per il fatto che vi aveva lasciati, o...*

*No, no, non era quello, non perché eravamo ferite del fatto che ci aveva lasciato, no, non era questo, lei era andata perché c'era bisogno, poi non è che era andata via e ci aveva dimenticato, che non ci parlava, che non ci chiamava, no... Anzi, se noi siamo qua, se noi stiamo ancora studiando, e se noi studiavamo là era per mia madre, quindi io non ho rancore... Era solo un'abitudine, perché non avevo tanta fiducia con lei, non riuscivo...però adesso va meglio.*

- (o) *Io la chiamo 2-3 volte la settimana, alcune volte sorridente, con un sorriso vero, altre volte tento di farlo ma non riesco e lei mi dice "che problema hai?". Non le dico niente, non glielo dico, però appena mi da due o tre consiglietti, due o tre parole e mi rianima. Altrettanto la mia mamma che sta qua, io le voglio bene, tanto bene. Quando la mia mamma che sta qua, la mia vera mamma, mi da dei consigli io li prendo... però non mi rianima come mi rianima quella che sta giù. È tutta un'altra cosa. Io con quella che sta a Santo Domingo ho dormito fino ai 7 anni. Io con quella che sta qua non ho la stessa confidenza, anche se quella di Santo Domingo non la vedo tutti i giorni, l'ho visto solo quei 4 mesi che sono tornato giù a Santo Domingo dopo 5 anni, ma per me era la stessa cosa come quando ero piccolo e anche adesso se ritorno è la stessa cosa. Invece con la mia vera mamma che sta qua non ho la stessa confidenza né di parlare, né di reagire. Quando all'inizio stavo male perché non vedevo tutti i giorni mia mamma che sta a Santo Domingo, però quella che sta qua mi ha appoggiato a non star male, ha fatto tutto perché io stia bene, mi ha dato tanto, tanto, tanto. Qualunque cosa volessi faceva di tutto per farmela avere, se non era una cosa che era un casino per lei farmi avere; se era una cosa che per lei io non dovevo fare, non dovevo avere mi diceva questo no.*

- (p) *Prima ero un po' arrabbiata con lei (la madre) perché mi criticava su tutto quello che facevo, su come sono cresciuta... Per esempio non ero capace proprio sulle faccende domestiche perché a casa faceva tutto mia nonna e su questo mia mamma diceva "ma la nonna non ti ha insegnato niente?" Ma lei non può criticare la mia nonna perché è lei che mi ha cresciuta mentre mia mamma non ha vissuto tutta la mia infanzia la mia adolescenza. [...] Da una parte se non*

*mi mandava i soldi morivo però dall'altra penso che lei non mi può criticare perché non è stata mai con me.*

- (q) *A volte lei dice che noi non l'ascoltiamo mai e io inizio a sclerare. Io le dico che per 4 anni non l'ho più vista e che sono abituato così. E lei invece arriva e si mette a urlare fai quello, fai quello... ma poi alla fine io faccio quello che mi dice...  
E lei cosa dice?  
Che non è colpa sua e che l'ha fatto per il nostro bene... che se vuoi una cosa devi sacrificarne un'altra...  
E tu pensi che lei l'abbia fatto per voi?  
Sì alla fine qua ho più cose... anche là avevo gli amici ma non c'è possibilità di andare a lavorare, a 16 anni non puoi fare niente... mentre qua posso fare tutte le cose...*
- (r) *Dopo un poco io la scuola l'ho lasciata, finite le medie perché sono tornato a Santo Domingo e non volevo più tornare. Cioè, all'inizio non volevo andare, sono tornato là e non volevo più tornare, dopo neanche 3-4 mesi volevo ritornare, non ce la facevo più di là. Perché la vita là è diversa da qua. Stai benissimo i primi mesi, rivedi i tuoi amici, io giravo di qua e di là, ma dopo un po' mi sono detto questa non è la vita che io voglio, io qua un lavoro non me lo potrei trovare come lo potrei trovare in Italia. Così sono tornato qua e appena tornato ho cominciato a lavorare, cioè io a 15 anni ho cominciato a lavorare. Adesso che sono qua sono contentissimo di essere qua. Se ti devo dire la verità io a Santo Domingo ci andrei solo per le vacanze, perché ormai ho passato la maggior parte della mia vita qua. Nove anni li ho passati a Santo Domingo ma ormai qua sono dieci. Ho preferito venire qua farmi un futuro e andare là solo per le vacanze.*

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