



Punjabi “housewives” in central Italy: navigating patriarchy, labor exploitation, and welfare exclusion

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Abstract

Who benefits from the exploitation of women’s work, and how? Marxist feminists in the 1970s–1980s and recently theorists of Social Reproduction argued that women’s work is exploited twice, or “super-exploited,” by capital and patriarchy. Such “super-exploitation” is sustained by the process of “housewifization,” which legitimizes the extraction and accumulation of surplus value from the social reproductive work of women. The housewife ideology not only mystifies social reproductive work as natural — thereby legitimizing it as free — but also frames women’s productive work as marginal — thereby legitimizing it as cheaper and more precarious. Building on Maria Mies’ (1981) famous study of women lacemakers in India, where the devaluation of women’s work is shown to serve both capital and patriarchy, I analyze the experiences of Punjabi “housewives” in central Italy, exploring them through the lens of one family and specifically its youngest and eldest daughters, whom I interviewed during ethnographic fieldwork. I show how, despite the essential role played by these women in their family mobility project, the housewife ideology — together with other patriarchal constructs of honor and caste endogamy — obscures the value of their social reproductive and productive work and imposes a number of restrictions on their freedom. I find, further, that their super-exploitation is aggravated in the context of migration: the labor exploitation and welfare exclusion that they face in Italy due to the country’s exclusionary immigration regime and unregulated capitalist market complicate their chances to challenge the oppressive relations they are involved in.

Keywords Female migration · Punjab · Patriarchy · Exploitation · Italy

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Introduction

The central Italian region of Lazio, and particularly the Latina province (around 70 km south of Rome), is today a key hub of agricultural production, exporting fresh food to the international market and employing large numbers of foreign migrants to work in the fields and factories of the area.¹ Many of these migrants come from the Indian Punjab,² a state that has faced a series of economic, political, environmental, and social crises throughout the twentieth century. The liberalization and capitalization of the Indian agrarian economy, initiated in the 1960s with the Green Revolution and intensified throughout the 1980s, changed dramatically the socioeconomic landscape of Punjab, where the economy was mainly based on agriculture. There, after an initial boom in production, the Green Revolution led in the long run to the depletion and dispossession of land, to rising class inequalities, and the growth of communal violence (Corsi 2006), accompanied by phenomena of farmers' indebtedness and suicides (Padhi 2012), drug abuse, impoverishment, urbanization, and emigration (Garha 2020a, b; Sharma et al. 2023b; Shiva 2016). A recent study (Sharma et al. 2023a) reports that Punjab is the second state in India in terms of emigration rate, with over 13 percent of rural households having at least one member abroad. This trend is rising: 74 percent of total emigration from Punjab between 1990 and 2022 occurred since 2016. Moreover, the flows changed over time: if previously the UK and the USA were common destinations, now they receive less than 3 percent of the total number of Punjabi migrants, whereas the majority move to Canada (42 percent), Dubai (16 percent), Australia (10 percent), and Italy (6 percent).

Starting from the 1980s, in fact, an increasing number of Punjabis began to migrate and settle in Italy (Bertolani 2016). The migratory flows between Punjab and Italy, two locations spatially and culturally distant, not linked by colonial ties, should thus be understood “against the backdrop of the growth in the global industrial army of labor due to the processes of impoverishment, rural dispossession, and production restructuring occurred in the Global South in the neoliberal period” (Pradella and Cillo 2015: 148). Over time, through processes of chain migration, a large diaspora formed: today, Italy is the first country in the EU for number of Indian residents, with 164,419 officially registered in 2023 (Ministero del Lavoro e delle Politiche Sociali 2023). The spatial distribution of Indians in Italy depends mainly on employment opportunities and social networks and gravitates around two poles: the northern regions of Lombardia, Emilia-Romagna, and Veneto — where they are employed primarily in the dairy and leather industry — and the central region of Lazio (the Rome-Latina cluster) — where they are mainly involved in agriculture and food processing industry (Garha 2020a, b).

¹ In 2023, foreigners in the Latina province amounted to 54,446 (9.6% of the population), of which 13,145 (24%) Indians (ISTAT).

² Although there is no official data on the exact number of Punjabis among Indians in Italy, some estimate that they constitute over 80% of the total Indian population (Bertolani 2018; Garha 2020a, b; Lum 2012; Omizzolo 2018; Saha 2013). Mapping the Indian temples in Lazio during fieldwork, I found evidence of this by censusing 11 Sikh and 3 Ravidassia temples – two religions practiced exclusively by Punjabis – against only 2 Hindu temples.

In the last fifteen years, Punjabis in the Latina province received increasing media and scholarly attention due to the severe exploitation they suffer under the criminal system of “agromafia” (Omizzolo 2018, 2019; Osservatorio Placido Rizzotto, FLAICGIL 2018). This, to keep production costs low and maximize profits in the EU market, relies on the cooperation of employers, “caporali” or gang-masters, intermediaries, and corrupt officials to provide the cheap and disposable labor of workers from Punjab, where a thriving business of “travel agencies” provides visas to prospective emigrants against heavy fees, which leave them and their families indebted for years, often with tragic consequences (Sala and Ananda 2022). Such attention, however, was exclusively directed to the *male* Punjabi migrants, who are known to do heavy manual jobs for meager payments, without physical or social protection, often with irregular contracts or without a contract, in a clear violation of their labor and human rights. In this article, instead, I focus on a less manifest — albeit not less severe — form of exploitation, which remains relatively understudied³: namely, that of the *female* Punjabi migrants who reunite with male family members in central Italy and often also work in agriculture or the food processing industry besides taking care of house, elderly, and children.

In the course of the fieldwork I conducted among Punjabis in central Italy (for my Master’s studies first and for my Ph.D. afterward) between 2020 and 2024, I interviewed over 50 women and collected a survey with 252 Punjabi migrants in the Latina province (half of whom females) to explore how gender and caste relations change in the process of their immigration to Italy. A key finding of my research is that many of these women, who in Italy perform both wage work and social reproductive labor, qualify as main or co-breadwinners in their households. However, despite their essential contribution to their families’ mobility projects and their involvement in the Italian economy, their role remains undervalued by the housewife ideology and their freedoms constrained by other patriarchal constructs such as family honor and caste endogamy. Further, their disadvantaged class position as irregular workers in the primary sectors in Italy and their precarious civic status, into which they are pushed by an exclusionary immigration regime, complicates their chances to challenge the oppressive relations they are involved in, raising the costs of their resistance.

To illustrate this argument, I discuss here the experiences of a Punjabi family as they were told to me mainly by its eldest and youngest daughters, with whom I established close contact throughout my fieldwork in the Latina province. I focus on this single household to highlight micro-level relational dynamics within the family and analyze how gender roles are constructed and negotiated against the different expectations and aspirations that each member has for herself and for others. However, the experiences of the members of this family resonate with those of many other Punjabi migrants that I met and interviewed during fieldwork, whose stories cannot be told here with the same extensiveness.

³ An exception is Meenakshi Thapan’s study of the wives of Punjabi migrants employed as cow-milkers in northern Italy (Thapan 2013), where the author highlights women’s crucial role in sustaining the family mobility project and denounces their state of isolation, uncertainty, and invisibility in Italian society.

The article is structured as follows: I begin by presenting the family's story, focusing on such events as marriages, illnesses, and work choices, described by the daughters as crucial turning points of their lives in Italy. I show how, despite the role played by these women in the success of their family mobility project, the value of their work remained unrecognized due to the construct of the housewife. This ideology sustains the super-exploitation of women's productive and social reproductive work by reducing them to the role of housewives, even when they work outside the home. I illustrate how other patriarchal constructs, namely family honor and caste endogamy, support the housewife ideology by imposing restrictions on women's behavior and choices. I then turn to describe the labor market and legal context that these women navigate in Italy, characterized by labor exploitation and welfare exclusion. I conclude by showing how they employed different strategies in the face of these structural and ideological constraints.

Methods

This article draws on the fieldwork I conducted for my Ph.D. in the Latina province between 2022 and 2024. In the first two years, I conducted 28 field visits to the area and established rapport with various members of the local Punjabi community. In 2023, I stayed in a municipality in the Latina province for one month and conducted exploratory open-ended interviews and participant observation in the local Punjabi temples. In 2024, I moved to live for three months in the residential complex where the family presented here resides (where over a thousand Punjabis live concentrated). There, I did full-time ethnographic research and collected an anonymous survey of the Punjabi community in person. I conducted participant observation during numerous public and private events, family gatherings, and religious celebrations, as well as in the daily life of the residential complex. After leaving the field, I maintained frequent communication with ten research participants via mobile phone (and with others sporadically), keeping track of the changes occurring in their lives and families from remote.

Doing fieldwork intermittently, a condition motivated both by my Ph.D. program demands and regulations as well as by the difficulties in finding accommodation in an area already overcrowded and of difficult access, obviously had some limitations compared to the long-term immersive fieldwork of classic anthropology. For instance, as a researcher, I often felt pressured in the effort to collect a lot of data in a short time, which sometimes forced me to structure the interview questions ahead or limit the number of interlocutors I could talk to. On the other hand, getting in and out of the field and nurturing relations with participants over a sustained period also carried some advantages: it allowed me to observe how their lives developed through the years; it gave me time to analyze data in between visits and to plan follow-up interviews to investigate relevant themes; it let me gradually develop more research questions and deeper relations of trust with my interlocutors. In fact, as many participants told me, the fact of me returning over time and keeping in touch by phone during the periods of absence made them develop trust and grow confident that I had a genuine interest in knowing about their lives, more than if I had

stayed a longer period and then left the field for good. Moreover, due to the transnational relations that migrants maintain with left-behind families or with relatives and friends scattered around the world, they are used to communicating by phone. This digital interaction is sometimes even easier, since many are busy at work or at home most of the day and thus would not be readily available to meet in person. Further, in some cases, digital communication facilitated the protection of participants' privacy and their ensuing willingness to openly express their thoughts since it was not uncommon that other family members would demand to be present during face-to-face interviews, especially in the case of women being interviewed.

The experiences reported here were told to me by the youngest and eldest daughters of the selected family during several interviews and conversations over the last two years of our interaction. I met the eldest daughter, Simran, at the beginning of 2022, during my first field visit to the Latina province while I was struggling to find a Punjabi temple not signaled on the road. Seeking directions, I stopped by a residential complex where I knew that many Punjabis lived (which later became a key site of my fieldwork). There, I met Simran, who was hanging the laundry in the front yard of her house, and I approached her asking for directions. We communicated in a creative mix of Italian, Hindi, and Punjabi. She helped me locate the temple, we exchanged numbers, and soon she became my gatekeeper in the field, introducing me to her younger sister Nav, to her parents, and to many other members of her family and community, initiating a snowball that greatly helped my research activities.

My position as a young unmarried Italian woman with an interest in Punjabi culture and basic knowledge of the Punjabi language allowed me to get closer to the young women in the family, who, therefore, were my main interlocutors. My Italian nationality puts me, by default, in an unbalanced position of power towards research participants, who are Punjabi immigrants in Italy. Besides being transparent about my research, obtaining informed consent repeatedly, and checking back and forth my results and ideas with them, I have tried to mitigate my privileged national identity by putting it to their use, for instance, by helping them deal with Italian bureaucracy and legislation, by expressing my solidarity to their problems during strikes and demonstrations in their support, by making them aware of their rights (and the violation thereof), by engaging in first person in the launch of a government-funded Italian language school in their municipality, in response to the complaint raised by many women about the lack of opportunities to learn Italian. Participants' repeated expressions of gratitude for my interest in their lives and engagement in their communities and their explicit appreciation of my work and methods convinced me that their involvement in this research was not only consensual but willful and enthusiastic.

The data I present here consists mainly of excerpts from open-ended interviews I conducted and recorded in Italian and Punjabi with Simran and Nav at their homes. I then transcribed and translated the recordings into English, coding the texts inductively through thematic analysis. I further checked the information gathered in these interviews throughout the numerous conversations I had with Simran and Nav's parents, neighbors, friends, and other relatives who came to visit them while I was living in a nearby flat. I also conducted participant observation with the family on numerous occasions, such as birthday parties, celebrations in the temple (Sunday

ceremony, special religious events), as well as in the daily life of fieldwork, for instance, while giving and receiving lifts by car, going shopping at the market or watching movies together, helping kids do their homework, and so on.

A family project of caste and class mobility

The family comprises a mother, father, four daughters (Simran, Sita, Divya, Nav), and a son. They come from a Punjabi village and define themselves as Chamar by caste. In Punjab, Chamars are one of the most numerous and most socially mobile Dalit castes (Puri 2003). Yet, in contrast with the myth of Punjab being a casteless society, this and other Dalit castes suffered historical discrimination and oppression by the dominant castes, in particular by the landowning Jat Sikhs (Jodhka 2002; Judge 2015; Madhopuri 2010; Ram 2007; Singh 2019). While Jats have a longer history of international emigration and still constitute the largest portion of the Punjabi diaspora (Sharma et al. 2023a), in the course of the twentieth century, Chamars, too, began to emigrate abroad in search of better living conditions. Their improved status sometimes led to inter-caste conflicts in their Punjabi villages and diasporic settlements (Judge 2015; Singh 2019; Taylor 2013, 2014, 2018; Taylor and Singh 2013).

In the Latina province, the majority of Punjabi migrants identify either with the dominant castes of Jats and Luvanas or with the Dalit caste of Chamars. After the separation of Chamars from mainstream Sikhism and the official proclamation of the Ravidassia religion in 2010 (Ram 2017), several Ravidassia temples emerged in Italy, often in the proximity of Sikh *gurdwaras*. This indicates that a Chamar diaspora in Italy is developing next to the Sikh community (although the latter is more rooted in the country due to its longer presence and larger size⁴), asserting a separate and equally dignified identity to upper-caste Punjabis.

As it often happens in the process of social mobility, the upwardly mobile members of historically disadvantaged groups tend to adopt the beliefs and practices of those higher in the hierarchy in order to signal their improved status (Chowdhry 2019; Ciotti 2010, 2011; Desai 2017). In the context of Indian society, the “Dalitization of patriarchy” expresses the process whereby upwardly mobile Dalits, in imitation of the upper castes’ morality codes, adopt increasingly oppressive gender norms with improving class status, withdrawing women from the labor market and expressing prestige through their domestic confinement and subordination (Heyer 2014; Kapadia 1995; Mies 1981; Rao 2005; Thakur 2019). Studies of Dalit female agricultural laborers in Andhra Pradesh (Da Corta and Venkateshwarlu 1999) and Uttar Pradesh (Mehrotra 2017) show that, in rural India, capitalist accumulation strengthens both upper caste and upper-class patriarchy, resulting in a decline in women’s autonomy and in the devaluation of their role in the family and in society. Similarly, in Haryana and Punjab, upwardly mobile Chamars tend to signal status through the adherence to upper-caste constructs of female domesticity, honor, and

⁴ In Italy there are 64 registered Sikh *gurdwaras*, of which 11 in Lazio, and only 6 Ravidassia temples, of which 3 in Lazio.

caste endogamy (Chowdhry 2019). These were recurrent themes in the interviews with Nav and Simran: the family's disadvantaged caste identity required its members to make extra effort to affirm their worth within the Punjabi diaspora in Italy.

This family's migration can in fact be considered a project of both class and caste mobility: besides the economic advancement sought through employment in the Italian job market, a motive of migration was the desire to break away from caste prejudice in Punjab. Due to the presence of multiple castes in the Punjabi diaspora in Italy, however, migration did not shun the family from caste discrimination: one of the first memories reported by Nav in the initial period of their life in Italy is of having been refused help by neighbors, themselves Punjabi migrants of a different caste: when Nav's parents asked them if they could carry groceries from the supermarket (which didn't fit the family's scooter) in their car, they ignored the request and walked on by. The father, in response, instructed his daughters so:

We shall never let anyone look down upon us, we have to always stand on our own feet (Nav).

Throughout the interviews, other instances of boycott, symbolic domination, and social exclusion by upper-caste Punjabis in Italy against Chamars emerged. These were experienced during religious and social events, at work, and most evidently in personal relations. Chamar interviewees, in fact, often reported that the upper castes would "overtly say that we are all the same, but in their heart, they continue to make a difference." Thus, although the historical occupational, residential, and class differences between Chamars and upper caste Punjabis may blur in central Italy, where they are exposed to the same job, housing, and legal opportunities, however, caste continues to exert its divisive power at the level of social relations: proof of this is that caste endogamy is ubiquitous and a strong stigma persists about inter-caste marriages, especially about those between Dalits and non-Dalits.

In the family presented here, caste pride is expressed in the parents' attachment to the concept of honor and in their resolute adherence to the principle of caste endogamy: the father arranged all his children's marriages with Chamar spouses. This was motivated by the father's distrust in other caste communities, which, according to him, "only care about money," and by the fear of people's judgment and the negative light that an inter-caste marriage would shed on his caste community. According to Simran, in fact, if a Chamar girl married a man of a different caste, people "would have a reason to say that Chamar guys are not good enough, that's why girls run after men of other castes".

The rule of caste endogamy generates tensions, especially among the youngest migrants — the so-called 1.5 or second generations — who grew up in Italy and were exposed to different cultures of love and marriage (Bertolani 2015). Many, including Nav, do not share their parents' concerns about caste and express the desire to overcome them, appealing to principles of equality of all humans regardless of caste, religion, nationality, and gender. This youth represents a hope for the future disintegration of caste and gender inequalities among Indians, at least in the Italian diaspora; yet, presently, the contradictions and struggles that these young migrants face in their families are made even more complex by their work and legal status in Italy, as I will discuss later in the text.

***“Sons instead of daughters”*: the role of women in the household**

As previously reported in studies conducted in northern Italy (Bertolani 2016; Compiani and Quassoli 2005; Garha 2020a, b; Lum 2012) and generally confirmed in my research, the typical gender pattern of Punjabi migration to Italy entails men arriving first. Once settled and regularized, those already married apply for family reunification to make their wives and children join them, whereas the single men travel shortly back to India, where their left-behind families arrange their marriage with local women of the same caste. Women have a right to veto, but not much choice in terms of when and whom they will marry, and thus also of where they will move if married to an international migrant. Of all the women I interviewed, none declared to have desired or planned to move to Italy but rather to have migrated either after the father or because their marriage had been arranged with an “Italy-wala” (a migrant to Italy).

Most Punjabi women thus enter Italy with a family visa, and their residence permit is linked to that of their husbands or fathers. This was also the case in the family presented here: the first to emigrate was the father, who arrived in Italy in 2000 after having served 20 years in the army in India. He was helped by a relative who had previously settled in northern Italy, where he first arrived. After months of searching for jobs and getting underpaid or abused by employers, he moved to Lazio, where he worked in agriculture as a casual laborer. Three years later, his wife and five children joined him through family reunification (as Nav explains, the immigration policy was much less strict then, so he did not need to prove a high income or a suitable accommodation).

In the beginning, the family of 7 lived in a two-room flat, paying 500 Euro rent per month. The mother was 40 years old at the time. Back in Punjab, she says that she was a “housewife” — meaning that she was taking care of the house, of in-laws and children, and of the production of food for family needs, including cultivating vegetables and handling cattle. In Italy, she and her husband worked for 17 years in agriculture, harvesting and packing vegetables, against a wage of 3 Euro per hour, 10 to 12 hours a day. None of them ever had a long-term contract, any paid or sick leave, nor was a member of a trade union. Over time, the father developed a series of health issues, some of which required him to undergo surgeries and lifelong treatments. The first appeared only two years after family reunification: while harvesting, he began to show an allergic reaction, which developed into a severe infection that forced him to quit the job to undergo treatment. At the time, his oldest daughter was 16 years old, and his youngest son was 7.

The father’s withdrawal from work caused a shock in the family since all members depended on him for subsistence. The emergency pushed both the mother and Simran to start working in agriculture. Simran thus had to drop out of school at the age of 16. As she recalls:

When we arrived, it was hard... We didn’t have money: only my father was working, and six people behind him had to eat; how was that feasible? So we decided to help: Mom started to work, I started to work, because my siblings were still too young and going to school. (Simran).

She regrets that she couldn't finish school, but at the same time says she is happy that she could "lend a hand" when the family needed it — although her contribution was indeed more than just "a hand": it was instead the main income, together with that of the mother. Four years later, the father decided that it was time for her to get married and arranged Simran's wedding with a man of the same caste in Punjab, who afterward joined her in Italy via family reunification.⁵

As soon as Simran moved out of the family house at the age of 22, it was her younger sister Sita, who was 16 at the time, who dropped out of school and began to work in agriculture to sustain the family, allowing the three younger siblings to continue to attend school. Once the youngest daughter Nav graduated and could work, the other two sisters and the brother had their marriages arranged by the father with Punjabis of the same caste settled in northern Italy, where they currently live with their in-law families. The sisters, besides their jobs in agriculture and factories, also take care of their husbands, children, and in-laws. As Nav complains, such duties of care are not equally expected from the brother, who instead:

...Doesn't even know or care what medicines Dad needs. We do all the work, whereas my brother lives with his wife, who does everything for him: he has no problems, no responsibilities, no worries... Instead, I have to go to work, and I have a thousand problems there, then I come home and I have a thousand problems here...

Nav is now 27; she is the only one who completed high school and thus speaks Italian like a native, with a strong local accent. Thanks to her education, she could find jobs outside agriculture: she worked as a cashier in a supermarket and as a machine operator in an agricultural company, supervising and coordinating other workers. After graduation, she was the only daughter employed since her sisters were getting married and having kids. She thus became the family's primary breadwinner and took up the responsibility of her aging parents. She is also the only one co-habiting with them and, since her requests to the employers to work part-time keep being ignored, she must juggle between 10-h-long workdays and the care of her parents, a task in which she is helped only by her sister Simran.

Simran is 34, lives in a flat near her parents with her two kids and husband, and she quit work. Her husband works 7 days a week, 10 hours a day, for a meager salary and expects her to prepare food for him when he goes to work at 7 a.m. and when he returns in the evening. Despite some job offers she received and would gladly accept to increase the family income, her husband dictates that she stay home to look after the house and children. Since both her parents are now unable to provide

⁵ This is a reversed gender pattern of migration to the one usually taken by Punjabis in Italy, as above described. The fact that Simran made her husband come to Italy could have let her retain more freedom upon her choices compared to women who are sponsored by their husbands and thus dependent on them, who instead have less bargaining power. But the advantages that Simran could potentially have gained in terms of agency were prevented by the ideology of the housewife held by her husband, who prevents her from working outside the house for her to perform full-time housework, elderly and childcare, as shown below.

for themselves, she also goes every day to prepare lunch and do the cleaning in their house. She describes her daily routine as exhausting:

I wake up at 5.30, prepare sandwiches, make tea, then take the kids to school: Rahul at 7 has to be in the school bus, so first I leave him, then I prepare breakfast for my husband who has to go to work, then I take my daughter to school, then I do the cleaning... As soon as I am done with that, I go to my parents' house and cook them lunch. Then at 1 I pick up Rahul from school, give him lunch, take him to the afterschool. Then it's Ambika's turn, I pick her up from school... Then my husband comes back from work so I need to rush back since he needs to find me at home and the dinner must be ready. I look after everything. It's really tiring...

Nav, too, seems overburdened by the care of her parents. She claims that these duties prevent her from getting married and starting her own family, as well as from moving out to find better opportunities:

My parents don't want me to leave home. They say: 'If you leave, how will we survive?' Because I take care of everyone, without me they have too many problems, they are lost. I understand it, but...

She complains of having been put "in such a tight position" that she cannot make the slightest movement before being asked to provide for the family:

As soon as I go to the bathroom, immediately my phone rings with someone requiring my help (Nav).

Both Nav and Simran complained that in Punjabi "tradition," such unequal gender division of labor within the household is taken for granted: the exploitation of women's free social reproductive work transits, after marriage, from the parental household to that of the husband. As Nav reports:

The role of women in India is always this, to stay home and look after the parents. Until you get married, you look after yours, then after his. For instance, I am not married, so I take care of my parents. But once I get married, I become responsible for the care of his family from morning to evening.

Women's ascribed responsibilities as housemakers and caregivers are explained by Nav as based on a normative division of labor dominant in their country of origin:

Women in India always had to stay home. Here in Italy, they work too because rent and expenses are higher, but in India the husband goes to work in the morning and when he comes back the woman has to make sure that he finds everything ready... She has to clean the house, wash the clothes, prepare the dinner, everything. He goes to work, brings the money, but at home he does nothing. If he feels like it, he may cook the Sunday lunch, but if we are talking about housework, taking kids to school, paying bills, cleaning.... She does all that.

The assumption whereby women, even when they work outside the home, remain nonetheless “housewives” was the core of an important debate on the value of women’s work inside and outside the household, initiated by Marxist feminists in the 1970s–1980s (Dalla Costa and James 1972; Federici 1975; Mies 1986; Vogel 2013) and revived recently by theorists of Social Reproduction and critical feminists (Bhattacharya 2017; Ferguson 2016; Fraser and Vogel 2017; Mezzadri 2021; Picchio 1992). In *Women and The Subversion of the Community*, Dalla Costa and James (1972) claimed that the title of “housewife” refers to women wage less and wage laborers alike: “All women are housewives, and even those who work outside the home continue to be housewives” because what is particular about domestic work is not its amount or nature, but the “quality of life and quality of relationships which it generates, that determines a woman’s place wherever she is and to whichever class she belongs” (ibid.: 2). The *Wages for Housework* movement of the 1970s further developed these ideas, criticizing the dichotomy between production and reproduction as a capitalist fiction and highlighting the *value* generated by social reproductive work (Mezzadri 2021). The naturalization of reproduction as the realm of “non-value” is, according to their analysis, sustained by the construct of the “housewife,” the key ideological tool utilized by capitalism to legitimize the extraction and accumulation of surplus value (in the form of the labor power of male wage workers) from the free social reproductive labor of women (Federici 1975).

Similarly, theorists of social reproduction focus on what Marx left “undeveloped or undertheorized” in his analysis of the production of surplus value under capitalism: namely, “the production and reproduction of labor power” (Bhattacharya 2017: 13). Social reproductive work — the performance of which, under patriarchy, is exclusively ascribed to women — “whether waged or unwaged, refers to the totality of those activities required to create, maintain, and restore the commodity labor power” (Mohandesi et al. 2017: 39). This includes all those tasks such as “housework, child-raising, schooling, affective care, and a host of other activities that serve to produce new generations of workers and replenish existing ones, as well as to maintain social bonds and shared understandings” (Fraser and Vogel 2017: 23). It “involves the provision of food, clothing, shelter, basic safety, and health care, along with the development and transmission of knowledge, social values, and cultural practices and the construction of individual and collective identities” (Luxton and Bezanson 2006: 3). As such, social reproductive work is “necessary to the existence of waged work, the accumulation of surplus value, and the functioning of capitalism as such” (Fraser and Vogel 2017: 23).

As shown by Maria Mies in her study of Indian women lacemakers (Mies 1981), the fact that in developing countries women’s work was often home-based — even when they produced for global commodity chains — was the justification for keeping it informal, unorganized, and non-unionized — and thereby also underpaid, undervalued, and precarious. The fictional dichotomies of productive/unproductive work, home/factory, public/private are deemed responsible for the devaluation of women’s labor, i.e., for obscuring the *value* that it produces. As the same author further develops in *Patriarchy and Accumulation* (Mies 1986), it is precisely the *housewifization* of women that enables and legitimizes their *super-exploitation* by capital and patriarchy. “Housewives” are in fact exploited twice: in the household, where

their social reproductive work is mystified as “personal service outside of capital” (Dalla Costa and James 1972), or as “labor of love” (Federici 1975) and thus expected to be performed free of charge and out of a natural aspiration; and in the capitalist system, where women’s productive work is made cheaper and more precarious by being defined as marginal, or supplemental to the real value-producing male wage. The naturalization of the role of women as “housewives” is complementary to that of men as “breadwinners” and gender norms of appropriate femininity and masculinity are constructed accordingly to ensure the maintenance of this status quo.

One crucial point that emerges from Mies’ concept of *super-exploitation* is that, through the construct of the housewife, the exploitative interests of capital dovetail with those of patriarchy: in her example of female home-based workers in India, husbands appear to take advantage of both women’s social reproductive *and* productive work to achieve upward class mobility. Such mobility, however, has the effect of improving men’s status while weakening that of women. As mentioned above, claims of improved status are often accompanied by the imitation of upper-caste and upper-class rules of morality and ideals of femininity, which involve the withdrawal of women from paid work and the strengthening of restrictions over their movements, choices, and sexuality.

The family, despite the hardships faced in Italy, successfully managed to improve its status: the siblings who settled in the North of the country are employed in regular factory jobs; Simran’s knowledge of Italian improves every day thanks to her lively school-going kids. She also obtained a driver’s license, bought a car, and helped cousins and other relatives move to Italy. Nav, after being rejected in all her requests for a mortgage, pooled together her savings and those of her parents, borrowed some extra money from other family members, and bought the large house in which she lives with her father and mother. The parents regularly visit the temple and have a large social network of friends. The two daughters clearly played a crucial role in the development and success of the family’s mobility project. However, their role remains undervalued as their contribution is framed as an exception to the norm prescribing to women the natural role of housewives: the father, to refer to Simran and Nav, states to have “sons instead of daughters,” thereby suggesting how women’s work, under such patriarchal ideology, cannot be appreciated per se, but instead finds its legitimation only as an exception, as an unusual performance of male duties.

“Honor is the most important thing”: gender norms and threats of family exclusion

The daughters’ contributions to family mobility and their sacrifices did not appear to be reciprocated by increased freedom or trust accorded to them: even when breadwinners, they continued to be policed and restricted in their movements and choices by the parents and, in the case of Simran, also by the husband (even though she sponsored his immigration). As Nav complains, she always faces restrictions, such as being prohibited from leaving the house after 10 p.m.,

wearing certain clothes, going to parties unaccompanied, and hanging out with friends. She also had her phone and movements regularly monitored by her parents, even in her late 20s:

If I go out with a guy and somebody sees me, people will start gossiping that I am a bad girl... My parents shall not hear one single rumor about me: I go to work and, as soon as my shift is over, I must call and say 'Mom, in 10 min I'll be home'. Once, I arrived 40 min late and they scolded me. I was just chatting with friends, drinking a coffee after work, but they know that it takes me 10 min to come home from work. And they are afraid for instance that I say 'I am at work' but in reality I am dating some guy... As this would destroy their reputation, and they are really scared that people will say: 'Their daughter is bad, she does what she wants...'

As emerges from Nav's words, a powerful ideological tool used in Punjabi families to justify the control of women's behavior and ensure their domesticity is the concept of family reputation or honor (*izzat*): women are considered repositories of it, and they are supposed to safeguard it by remaining docile, compliant, and — most importantly — chaste until marriage. A daughter's modesty and her acceptance of an arranged caste-endogamous marriage are the ways in which she is socialized into demonstrating respect and gratitude to her parents. Disregarding such rules of behavior would lead to loss of family honor, a dreaded eventuality:

By us it's not like you in Italy, where women after they turn 18 get freer... By us, after 18 we get more restricted, women in particular. If the daughter is of marriageable age, they are scared that she may do something wrong. If she makes a mistake, then the reputation is shattered... It's a serious problem, because for them honor is the most important thing: my father would rather go to jail than lose it (Nav).

What lies behind the fear that a woman may "make a mistake" is the risk that she may marry outside her caste. Regardless of how much labor Nav performed for the parents and her siblings, she is certain that — if she goes against their decision about her marriage — she will be cast out of her family:

Sadly, this is the mentality: the more you do, the less they notice... In the end, honor is the only thing they care about: if tomorrow I do anything wrong, they will forget everything I ever did for them in two minutes, because for them reputation is more important.

In fact, Simran later revealed to me that the main obstacle that prevents Nav from starting her own family is that she wants to get married to a man of a different caste, but she faces the absolute opposition of her family and argues daily with her parents, who want her to marry a Chamar man. Simran does not understand Nav's "stubbornness" and demands that she "like each of us sisters before her, accepts what father chooses." Nav, instead, demands "...only the freedom to marry whom I want. I listen to them for everything else, but at this point, all I ask for is the freedom to choose."

When I asked Nav what Punjabi women — even those, like herself, who grew up in Italy and were exposed to a different culture of love and marriage — risk if they nonetheless decide to choose their husband, she explained:

You know what's the problem? When parents choose the husband, should he then misbehave, for instance, if he starts to drink, they can scold him saying 'When we decided to marry our daughter to you, you were not like this'. So in that case, parents remain always there to support you. Instead, if I choose my husband, the day he becomes violent and, say, starts to beat me, if I go to my parents and complain that he is beating me, you know what their answer will be? 'You chose him, now you deal with it'. They will not help me in that case.

Thus, parental provision of material and emotional support appears conditional on the daughter respecting the rule of endogamy; not only would they not help her in case of need, but if Nav should decide to marry her lover, the parents threaten to repudiate her from the family. On the other hand, Simran's husband threatens her to end their marriage if she should side with her sister and support her decision. Both Simran and the parents, despite depending heavily on Nav practically and economically, seem ready to cut their ties with her if she asserts herself against them and breaks the taboo of inter-caste marriage. In a context of labor exploitation and welfare exclusion such as the one that Punjabi migrants face in central Italy, however, the family constitutes the core of social relations and of material support, and the prospect of being excluded from such an essential network appears costly, making the choice to resist family rules more arduous, as Nav's reflections illustrate. It is now to the analysis of such context that I move.

"They treat us like animals": labor exploitation and welfare exclusion

The majority of Punjabi migrants in the Latina area work under conditions of severe exploitation, precarity, and irregularities, as denounced by previous research (Amnesty International 2012; Blasetti 2019; Omizzolo 2018, 2019) and further confirmed in my interviews. Simran and Nav reported that the same conditions applied to their work experiences as well as to those of their father and mother. First, the precarity of their work is evident in that they only ever had seasonal (if any) job contracts, lasting from a minimum of 1 to a maximum of 9 months. As Nav reported about hers and her father's employment:

They used to make him two 6-months contracts per year. Paid leave? No, never. You get paid leave only if you have a yearly contract. He never ever had paid leave. Not even my mother, nobody. The contract I have now is 15 days for probation, then they will make it 2-months, then probably 3-months and then 6-months at best.

This temporal limitation allows employers to keep workers subordinate and pay them lower salaries with the threat of not issuing them a new contract if they

don't comply with these conditions — a situation that would jeopardize their legal residence in the country. Moreover, making only seasonal contracts waives employers from guaranteeing workers' access to welfare benefits, such as paid holidays or unemployment subsidies. In other advanced capitalist countries — such as Canada with its Temporary Foreign Worker Program (Binford 2019) — the predominance of short-term contracts for migrant agricultural workers has been criticized for putting the latter in a state of “structural precarity” (Otero 2019). Migrant workers' vulnerability to such threats allows employers to extract higher levels of productivity from them compared to local citizens or residents since they are always at risk of losing legal status and being expelled from the country if they don't comply with employers' demands.

Further, it is extremely common in the Latina area for employers to declare a work schedule and an hourly rate in line with the minimal standards established by national law (currently around 8–9 Euro per hour, up to 6,30 h per day, for a maximum of 6 days a week), while systematically underpaying and overworking the laborers. As Nav reports:

My father used to wake up at 4 a.m. and work 10–12 h a day. Me? On paper I should have my shift from 8 a.m. to 3 p.m.; but I work from 8 a.m. to 8 p.m. every day.

Since the hours declared in contracts are significantly less than those actually performed by the workers, their pension contributions are less than what they should be entitled to. Moreover, they never receive compensation for the extra time they work. Instead, part of their salary is often withheld unlawfully by employers with the deceitful motivation that they would have to pay more taxes for every extra hour performed (whereas by law, the workers should be remunerated at a higher rate for every extra hour). This is the case not only for unskilled agricultural laborers but also for higher job positions, such as the machine operator role that Nav performs. As she reports:

The more I work, the less they pay me, because (that's what they told me) they have to pay extra taxes.

The situation was not different in her previous job in the supermarket, about which Nav says:

For two years I worked without a day off. My contract stated 40 h per week but in reality I worked more than 60: I opened the shop at 4 a.m. and left at 4 p.m. every day, whereas the director arrived at 8.30 a.m., calm and rested. The extra hours were never counted, I just got a fixed salary of 1000 Euro per month. I quit the job having still 230 h unpaid, and they never paid them back. ‘Don't worry, we will reimburse you’ they said, but of course they never did. They take advantage of us because nobody speaks back, they think: ‘They are Indians, so they won't rebel’.

Finally, employers regularly attempt to avoid their responsibility for workers' protection, for instance by forcing employees to sign disclaimers of the company's accountability in case of injury. As Nav recounts:

They treat us like animals. The other day a colleague got injured at work: a huge sack of potato fell over him and he had to be taken away by ambulance... The next day, the boss quickly organized a meeting, gathered us all together, and made us sign a paper where we dismissed the company from all responsibilities in case of injuries in the workplace... The Indians all signed it without even knowing what it said... So I had to do it as well.

Although such procedures have no force in law, they serve to spread an atmosphere of fear among employees, preventing them from contesting or denouncing their unjust working conditions. Usually (and this is also the case for the family considered), the level of unionization among these migrant workers is low. There are several reasons for this: first, the companies they work for are usually small-to-medium size, and therefore not required by law to appoint a trade union representative. Second, migrants are often deceived by employers and remain largely unaware of their rights because of their low level of education or inability to understand Italian. Third, employees fear that filing a complaint against employers will result in negative consequences, and they have little trust in (or knowledge of) trade unions' interventions. Most importantly, the 2002 Bossi-Fini Law, which regulates immigration, demands non-EU migrants to provide proof of a job offer in the country to get admitted in the first place, and upon arrival, their residence permit is tied to the duration of their work contract. This gives disproportionate power to employers, making workers vulnerable to abuses and limiting their bargaining power in situations of irregularity, which they often encounter since the jobs available to migrant workers are mostly unqualified and informal positions in care, agriculture, construction, and service, sectors that are characterized by high levels of informality and exploitation.

Such policies reflect how, in Italy, immigration is managed by the principle of "economic legitimation" (Caponio and Graziano 2012; Finotelli 2009): the state looks at immigrants primarily as economic factors, with little regard for social and humanitarian considerations. Proof of this, as in other European countries, is the security-oriented immigration policy (exacerbated but not created ex-novo by far-right governments) that allows foreigners from non-EU countries to arrive and stay in Italy only as long as they can prove to be useful workers and welfare *producers*. However, the same are not supported to also become welfare *consumers* (Carmel et al. 2012). Instead, the "Mediterranean late guestworker model" — on which the Italian immigration regime is based — is structured to channel foreign immigrants "towards the most unstable positions of post-Fordist economic niches, characterized by flexible work contracts and few, if any, social protection rights" (Caponio and Graziano 2012: 112).

Further, in Italy, the labor market is strongly segmented between formal and informal sector, which makes "the demand for immigrant workers connected to specific peaks of productivity in the most low paid economic sectors" (Caponio and Graziano 2012: 108). Consequently, even regular working immigrants' access to

social protection is perpetually at risk due to their specific working status. Such an oppressive immigration regime reduces migrants’ possibilities of permanent settlement and, with it, their chances to access welfare benefits and to apply for citizenship (for which proof of ten years of uninterrupted regular residence in Italy is required). This was indeed the case in this family, where every member, despite residing and working in Italy, had only access to low-paid, seasonal, and irregular job contracts. The precarity and irregularity of their labor conditions in turn curbed their chances to access welfare benefits — such as an adequate pension relative to the amount of work they performed, unemployment subsidies, and sick, maternity, or holiday leave.

Conclusion

In this paper, I described the socio-economic role played by women in the Punjabi migrant community in central Italy. Through an in-depth analysis of the life and work experiences of a selected family, I revealed the multiplicity of constraints that characterize the condition in which these women are situated, both materially and ideologically, and on both individual and social scales. I argued, building on Marxist feminist and Social Reproduction literature, that this represents a case of “super-exploitation,” where women’s social reproductive and productive work is simultaneously crucial and undervalued. This happens, first, because of the specific patriarchal ideology that frames women primarily as “housewives” and employs the constructs of “honor” and caste endogamy to reinforce the control over women’s behavior and choices. Second, because of the unregulated capitalist labor conditions, in which women are not only paid less and have more precarious jobs but also perform for free and on their own the necessary yet strenuous labor of social reproduction. In addition, I find that their super-exploitation is aggravated by the highly exclusionary Italian immigration policies, which push migrants from non-EU countries into the most unregulated and exploitative sectors of the economy, with the result that “immigrants as providers of social protection do not seem to be entitled to any protection for themselves” (Caponio and Graziano 2012: 108). To support this line of argument, I described how, despite Punjabi women’s contribution to a major sector of the productive economy, as casual workers, they were systematically exposed to irregularities and violations of their labor rights. These irregularities, in turn, kept them in a precarious civic status and excluded them from welfare.

As a result of the latter welfare exclusion, women turn to the family as the only source of support for the fulfillment of their material needs, such as buying a house, undergoing medical treatment, etc. Because of this dependency, women who want to resist patriarchal relations often face difficult choices. For instance, accepting prescribed gender roles allows them to maintain the status, resources, and affective care that family ties guarantee; resisting them, instead, allows them to break free from parental control but also entails losing family’s material and emotional support. Simran and Nav can be seen as embodying each of these strategies: Simran, by adhering to the gender expectations imposed on her, retains some advantages in terms of security and stability but is limited in her choices by the husband (e.g., she is

forbidden from working outside the home) and overwhelmed by the social reproductive tasks that her parents and husband expect her to perform for free. Nav, instead, by wanting to resist the norm of caste endogamy imposed on her, faces the risk of being cut off from her family and community. In a context of structural precarity and labor exploitation such as the one that these women navigate in central Italy, the costs of losing the support of family are exceptionally high. All of this complicates their chances to resist the oppressive relations that they are involved in, even when they consider them unfair and want to challenge them, as in the case of Nav. Moreover, the patriarchal constraints imposed on women's movements and social life since childhood, with the excuse of protecting their virtue and family honor, prevent them from developing their social capital in Italy, which could provide a safety net should the family punish their disobedience with exclusion.

In this article, I tried to frame women's agency by taking a nuanced position between the extremes of compliance and resistance and to reflect on the consequences that women's strategies entail, given the multifaceted constraints that they face in Italy. I believe that refraining from using the language of oppression and considering free choices all those strategies employed by women to cope with external and internal constraints risks to "obscure or marginalize questions of subordination and exploitation" (Wilson 2013: 86), whereas Marxist feminism and Social Reproduction Theory provide the conceptual framework that allows one to address such questions directly and radically. Thus, to illustrate the boundaries of women's freedom of choice and self-determination, I considered the multiple structural and ideological constraints that are at play in their decision-making process, and articulated the wins as well as the losses that they encounter when they exercise their agency in different ways.

On my last day of fieldwork, I went to Nav's home to say goodbye to her and her family. When I reached their front yard, however, I found Simran and the parents in utter despair: the morning of that same day, Nav had ultimately left home to get married with the man she wanted. As Simran reported, over the last three months the drama had been escalating: Nav was refusing to eat and talk, was locking herself in her room, and for two days she had been threatening to kill herself by jumping out of the window or swallowing pills if they insisted with their demands. Thus, the parents had gathered Simran and the other siblings to the house to deal with the crisis. Fearing to be blamed if Nav hurt herself, they decided to call the police and declare that they were not responsible for her since "they didn't even touch her". When the police came, Nav asked them to escort her and, leaving behind all her clothes and possessions, she left the house. Simran, in tears, deplored that "she didn't even look at us in the face, she didn't care that her parents were crying" and claimed that she "chose him over her family". As Nav expected, the family cut all contacts with her and even decided to sell the house they had bought and lived in together and move to another city, to escape the stigma and the painful memories. In the following weeks, people from the community started gossiping about the event. When Simran showed me the published YouTube video of Nav's wedding celebrations, she remarked: "Look, she was smiling throughout".

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