

FROM ITALY TO ROMANIA: THE INVISIBLE RETURN OF ROMANIAN CARE WORKERS

MARIA SOLE VETTORE*

ABSTRACT

This research examines the return migration of Romanian women who spent over a decade working as live-in care workers in Italy¹. Drawing on ten narrative interviews conducted in the Moldova region of Romania, the study shifts the focus from migration as a failure of an individual's migratory project to a strategic life course stage, deliberately pursued by these women to ensure intergenerational social mobility. The findings reveal that while these women successfully return and reclaim domestic routines, relying on kinship support from their children and siblings, they face persistent socioeconomic marginalization. A critical pension gap emerges, the result of years of informal or grey labour in the Italian care sector leaving many with minimal financial security on the long term and in their older years. Furthermore, the research reframes the psychological distress of returnees not as a clinical pathology, but as a direct corporal cost of unregulated, high-intensity labour. Ultimately, the study highlights a triple absence, where returnees remain socially invisible and isolated, having fulfilled their familial mission at the expense of their own long-term structural well-being.

Keywords: return migration, care work, Italy Syndrome, transnational families, ageing.

INTRODUCTION

Migration is a dynamic social process that does more than relocate individuals; it fundamentally transforms power structures, roles and rights within the family left behind in Romania (Antman, 2013). In recent decades, the global landscape has

* PhD student at the University of Salamanca, e-mail address: maria-sole.vettore@usal.es.

¹ Although “badante” remains the most common term in Italian public discourse for migrant care workers, this study avoids it due to its pejorative connotations, which have created unjust stigmatization of foreign-born women in domestic labour (Faso, 2008). The term's problematic nature was formally acknowledged in 2012 in the Carta di Roma media guidelines, and more recent labour contracts have replaced it with the more neutral “assistente familiare” (Associazione Carta di Roma, 2012).

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seen a significant shift toward feminized migration, where women have become the primary breadwinners, navigating the complex “*global chain*” (Parreñas, 2001). This phenomenon is perhaps nowhere more visible than in the corridor between Romania and Italy, where the individual aspirations of women for economic independence have become inextricably linked to the structural stability of the Italian family (Sciortino, 2009; Vlase, 2006).

The roots of this movement lie in the radical transformation of Romania following the collapse of the Ceaușescu regime in 1989 (Sandu *et al.*, 2004). Once a nation where emigration was strictly prohibited, Romania transitioned into a primary country of origin for the workforce employed in the domestic and care sectors of several Western European economies, with migration serving as response to the home country’s systemic economic instability and changing social aspirations (*Ibidem*). While initial migration flows were male-dominated, a decisive gender shift occurred at the turn of the century (Balcanu, 2009; Ban, 2012; Vlase, 2006). As Italy faced a profound care gap – driven by demographic decline, the absence of adequate state-provided elderly care, and families’ growing reliance on privately-hired caregivers – qualified Romanian women, many of whom were mothers and wives in their 40s, filled this void by becoming the subsidiary pillars of the Italian welfare model (Cingolani, 2009a; Cozzi, 2019).

For many of these women, the migratory project involved significant de-skilling, as professionals such as engineers or managers found themselves relegated to the domestic care sector of another country, a field often characterized by informal *grey* labour and high relational density (Schroot, 2022; Catanzaro, Colombo, 2009). They lived a transnational paradox: renouncing the direct care of their own families in Romania to provide intensive care for others in Italy (Ambrosini, 2015; Ascione, 2012). This long-term separation often resulted in a care drain and persistent feeling of maternal guilt, even as these women successfully served as the main breadwinners for their households back home (Baldassar, Baldock, Wilding, 2007; Parreñas, 2005).

This cohort, having dedicated decades of labour migration, is now entering a new life course stage – that of return migration – shaped by the convergence of individual circumstances (such as advancing age and competing caregiving duties) and broader contextual factors, including the disruptive effect of the COVID-19 pandemic on the mobility and working conditions of migrant care workers (Porumbescu, 2022; Saghin *et al.*, 2025). While traditional economic models often framed the return to the homeland as a failure of the migratory project (Sjaastad, 1962; Todaro 1969) contemporary research views it as strategic and linear realignment (Cassarino, 2004; Durand, 2006). For these women, the decision to return is rarely abrupt, nor is it driven by a single cause. It typically results from the interplay of multiple, often interconnected factors: the achievement of specific family goals, such as completing their children’s education; the onset of personal health problems; and the desire to grow old in a culturally familiar environment – often reinforced by the simultaneous need to care for aging family members back home.

The article explores the lived experiences of these returning caregivers as they navigate the transition from migrants in Italy back to local residents in Romania, by examining their motivations, the pension gap resulting from periods of informal or irregular labour in Italy², and their identities and well-being in a homeland that remained their emotional and symbolic center throughout their years abroad.

THEORETICAL FRAMEWORK: RETURN MIGRATIONS THEORIES

Return migration has traditionally been read through an economic, cost-benefit lens, in which migrants are expected to return back home once the advantages that motivated their initial mobility have eroded (Sjaastad, 1962; Todaro, 1969; Durand, 2006). This framing, however, tends to reduce migrants to temporary economic agents, whose presence in the host society is legitimized only for as long as their labour is needed (Sayad, 2002), a reading that resonates strongly with the position occupied by care workers, whose employment is itself structurally precarious and contingent. Subsequent scholarship has moved away from this success/failure dichotomy, proposing instead an open-ended, transitional-mobility approach in which return is one stage within a broader and non-linear labour trajectory, shaped by socio-economic and structural constraints as much as by personal circumstances (Bermudez, Paraschivescu, 2020; Cassarino, 2004). Within this trajectory, the segmentation of labour market plays a decisive role: Romanian care workers entered a sector characterized by informality, low regulation and high relational density (Catanzaro, Colombo, 2009), a positioning that produced significant occupational de-skilling for women who had previously held qualified professional roles in Romania (Schroot, 2022). This structural confinement to a single, low-status labour niche – rather than a gradual loss of motivation to remain abroad – is what frames the analysis of return developed in this article.

However, the return decision-making process is further complicated by the migrant's inclusion in various social systems and the structural conditions of both the home and host societies (Hunter, 2010). At the household level, theories like the New Economics of Labour Migration (NELM) highlight that return is often a collective strategy for risk-sharing, made once remittances have fulfilled their

² According to participants' narratives, all women in the sample reported having worked without a formal contract at the outset of their employment in Italy. Their subsequent trajectories varied considerably: some eventually regularized their position, others worked in "grey" arrangements combining contracted and undeclared hours, while most ultimately secured stable contracts. As my research is based on qualitative narrative interviews rather than a structured survey, precise quantitative data on the duration or proportion of informal work for each participant are not available.

intended function as a financial safety net for the family, rather than a purely individual economic choice (Stark, 1991). At the macro-level, migrants are often constrained by the host country's requirements for inclusion in healthcare and administrative organizations. For older migrants, the need for continuity in medical treatment or the management of pension "paperwork" frequently necessitates regular back-and-forth travels, as the host country's welfare systems may offer greater security than those in the home country (Hunter, 2010).

While foundational theories originally conceptualized return migration through a binary lens – framing it strictly as either the successful completion or the failure of the migratory project – more recent studies have increasingly emphasized the fluidity and multidimensionality of the phenomenon. In particular, some studies have shown that return migration is not merely the failure of a migratory project, but is driven by far more complex motivations, situated within both individual and social dimensions of the migrant's life. Building on this shift, and drawing on a life course perspective (Elder, 1998), this article shows how return is not simply a geographic relocation, but a continuous negotiation of belonging – shaped by the practical need for systemic inclusion and by the enduring, symbolic pull of "home" (Bermudez, Paraschivescu, 2020; Hunter, 2010).

CONTEXTUAL FRAMEWORK: RETURN MIGRATION OF ROMANIANS

Building upon the shifting theoretical paradigms previously outlined, the case of Romanian return migration illustrates the practical reality of "dynamic return" (Cingolani, 2025a). Behavioural patterns among this group are characterized by a "layered approach to mobility", whereby returnees often maintain transnational social fields through regular visits, strong family networks abroad, and the transfer of social remittances, such as ideas, values, and behaviours acquired in the host country (Cingolani, 2025c). Many returnees exhibit a "cosmopolitanism of return" or a culture of diversity, possessing a heightened empathy toward other mobile subjects, such as refugees, due to their own experiences of exclusion and contact with multicultural environments abroad (Ciobanu, 2015). However, the reintegration process is often fraught with public stigmatization. Returnees have historically been disparaged as *căpșunari* ("strawberry pickers"³) or, during the pandemic, unfairly blamed for the spread of COVID-19 and characterized as social parasites who drain local welfare systems they did not contribute to (Cingolani, 2025a).

³ This term reflects a public perception that stigmatized the low prestige of manual labour performed abroad, as well as the crude and ignorant behaviours that returning migrants were believed to have adopted (Cingolani, 2025b).

In recent decades, Romanian return migration has shifted from an occasional event to a structural phenomenon (Anghel, Coşciug 2018; Stănculescu, Stoiciu, 2012). Between 2010 and 2024, more than 20% of the entire Romanian population has had work-related mobility experiences abroad (Anghel, Coşciug, 2018). Estimates suggest that between 2015 and 2017, the annual number of returnees from European countries back to Romania fluctuated between 160,000 and 200,000 people per year (OECD, 2019). A significant demographic shift occurred in 2022, which marked the first year since Romania's EU accession that returns exceeded departures, with a positive balance of approximately 85,000 persons (Cingolani, 2025b). This trend continued with positive balances of 66,000 in 2023 and 26,200 in 2024. In specific rural micro-regions, such as Borşa (Maramureş), it is estimated that 50% to 80% of the active population lives in Italy, though they return frequently for summer and winter holidays (Cingolani, 2025b).

As previously underlined, Italy represented one of the most attractive destinations for Romanian migrants. This was due, among other things, to the linguistic proximity between Italian and Romanian, the country's large informal economy, and the dense bilateral economic links built up over the years. However, while these structural and economic factors explain the initial motivation that drew Romanian women into Italy's informal care sector, they do not fully account for the eventual decision to leave it. Ionela Vlase (2013) argues that the return migration of women is often shaped by patriarchal bargaining and specific family life plans. While men often return to set up their own businesses in construction or agriculture, women frequently face marginalization in the local labour market upon return, finding that the domestic skills they used in Italy do not translate into local paid work (*Ibidem*). For many women, the decision to return is not a personal desire, but a compromise to avoid family conflict. Ionela Vlase (*Ibidem*) reports one woman's account of returning because her husband was "too devoted to his country", a justification the author interprets not as women's innocence but as a conscious strategy to conceal their awareness of the asymmetries involved. Elsewhere in her study, she notes that couples often time their return to coincide with their children's transition between school cycles. For women who returned within the family unit, and specifically those with daughters, the re-imposition of patriarchal authority at home constrains their own emancipation. Unable to pursue self-determination themselves, these women instead use social remittances as a form of resistance: they maintain transnational affective ties through regular calls with their former Italian employers, while also seeking to transmit the autonomy and knowledge they gained in Italy to their daughters. Furthermore, they often prioritize investing in their daughters' human capital, encouraging them to seek higher education and independent careers to escape the subordination they have experienced (Vlase, 2013).

METHODS: A QUALITATIVE APPROACH

This section outlines the methodological choices underpinning the fieldwork, with particular attention to how the interview protocol was designed to capture participants' occupational trajectories. Data collection took place between February and June 2025 in Iași and its surrounding rural counties, a north-eastern Romanian region with historically high emigration rates (Vietti, 2019) and a well-documented tradition of labour mobility toward the Italian domestic and care sector (Cozzi, 2019; Marchetti, 2016).

A qualitative, biographical approach was adopted (Cardano, 2011), through semi-structured, in-depth interviews lasting between one and two hours (Atkinson, 2002) – beyond reconstructing participants' life histories, the interview guide was specifically designed to probe the material conditions of their employment abroad – contract status, remuneration, working hours, and continuity or interruption of professional roles held prior to migration – in order to reconstruct a pattern of occupational segregation and de-skilling across the migratory cycle. Interviews were conducted in person, predominantly in participants' homes, and audio recorded. All names appearing in this article are pseudonyms.

Recruitment proved particularly challenging, owing to the social invisibility of returnee care workers and the absence of any official registry through which to identify them. Many potential participants also displayed initial reluctance, shaped by the stigma attached to return migration and by widespread perception, within their communities, of returnee mothers as having neglected their families (Cozzi, 2019). Given the impracticality of door-to-door outreach and the initial target of twenty interviews, the sampling strategy shifted from a purely urban focus to snowball sampling across the wider region, mediated by the Alternative Sociale Association. This mediation proved decisive not only in building trust with hesitant participants, but also in reaching women living at the margins of their communities' social and occupational life, largely excluded from local networks after years spent in live-in, largely undocumented employment.

As regards the data collection and analysis phase, the model used was Thematic Analysis as outlined by Braun and Clarke (2006). This approach was chosen to systematically identify, analyze and report patterns of meaning (themes) within the data, relevant to the participants' return migration experience. The analysis followed these phases: familiarization with the data, generating initial codes, searching for themes, reviewing, defining, and naming the themes, and finally, producing the report. Table 1 presents the socio-demographic and migratory profile of the interviewees, providing context for the thematic analysis discussed in the following sections.

Table no. 1

Socio-demographic and migration profile of the interviewees

Code Name	Age	Region in Romania	Destination context in Italy (city, region)	Primary migration motivation	Years abroad	Return motivation	Duration	Family status
Miluta	54	IS	Turin, Piedmont; Roseto degli Abruzzi, Abruzzo	Economic / labour migration	2008–2022	End of career	14	married
Elvira	68	IS	Bolzano, Trentino-Alto Adige	Economic / labour migration	2006–2019	End of career	13	married
Irina	60	SV	Rome, Lazio	Economic / labour migration	2013–2025	own health issues	12	divorced
Gabriela	73	IS	Rome, Lazio	Economic / labour migration	1995–2015	familial needs – children	20	widowed
Ilna	69	VS	Salerno, Campania	Economic / labour migration	2004–2020	familial needs – parents	16	widowed
Iulia	50	CJ	Florence, Tuscany	Economic / labour migration	2005–2014	familial needs – parents	9	single
Catrina	65	B	Rome, Lazio	Economic / labour migration	2003–2014	familial needs – children	11	widowed
Mirela	72	IS	Rome, Lazio	Economic / labour migration	2000–2010	own health issues	10	divorced
Natalia	68	VN	Rome, Lazio	Economic / labour migration	1999–2018	familial needs – parents	19	widowed
Olga	57	B	Rome, Lazio	Economic / labour migration	2000–2013	familial needs – parents	13	divorced

ANALYSIS AND FINDINGS

To understand this complex transition, the analysis focuses on four central pillars that emerged from the interviews:

- The migratory project: an examination of the socio-economic motivations for departure, previous professional backgrounds and family responsibilities. This section frames how the evolution of the initial migratory project shapes the desire for return decades later.
- The dynamics of definitive return: a focus on the transition from *cyclical* to *definitive* return. This pillar explores the triggers for concluding the migration, such as family needs or professional fulfillment, and the identity negotiations involved in moving from migrant back to local resident.
- Economic status and pension: an analysis of the pension gap and transnational financial insecurity. This section examines the long-term economic consequences of a fragmented career between Romania and Italy. It highlights the structural inequities of the labour market and the resulting disparity in retirement benefits, while exploring the resilient strategies returnees adopt to supplement their income.
- Health, well-being and corporal cost: an assessment of the physical and psychological state of returnees. It analyzes whether health challenges stem from natural ageing or rather from occupational exhaustion (burnout) from years of live-in care work.

ANALYSIS AND DISCUSSION: THE LIVED EXPERIENCE OF RETURN

The migratory trajectories of the interviewed women confirm a shift toward a female-led migration, evident in this sample from the early 2000s onward – a pattern documented in the literature on the Global Care chain (George, 2005; Parreñas, 2005), with women increasingly becoming primary breadwinners. This study reveals a high degree of gendered agency: interviewees consistently framed their migration around securing a better future for their children, rather than personal advancement. As one participant explained: “*I was forced to leave [...]. But I went anyway, to continue my children’s studies. [...] I went there especially for the kids. Yes, I wanted them to finish school*” (Elvira). I argue that this recurring narrative reframes migration not as a disruption of the maternal role, but as an act performed in continuity with it, a means through which these women sought to secure a better future for their children.

MIGRATORY PROJECT: ORIGINS, MOTIVATIONS AND LABOUR CONDITIONS

The geographic origin of the participants in the research reflects broader Romanian migratory trends. More than half of the interviewees came from the Moldova region, an area characterized by high emigration due to limited local professional opportunities (Vietti, 2019). A defining characteristic of this cohort is the age at migration. Nine out of ten women departed around the age of 40 (Cozzi, 2019). While they were employed in Romania, their wages were insufficient to guarantee a dignified life during the country's economic transition from a centrally planned to a market economy following the collapse of communism.

Consequently, migration functioned as a deliberate economic strategy pursued by these women to achieve specific family goals. For six of the women among my respondents, the primary goal was securing their children's education, while one participant used migration as a palliative strategy to distance herself from the emotional burden of her husband's death. Although many intended their stay to be temporary, the structural needs of their families often extended their time in Italy to a decade or more.

In Italy, the domestic care sector represented the only accessible labour market for immigrants with this socio-demographic and occupational profile (Redini, Vianello, 2020). Despite the structural precarity of such "grey" labour and the prevalence of off-the-books work (Longo, 2012), particularly in Southern Italy, participants often reported high relational satisfaction, attributing the ethical conduct of their employer to their own luck:

Gabriela: *"I was lucky meeting them [...] they were so kind"*.

Ilona: *"I felt good everywhere... they always told me I was a good woman"*.⁴

This positive framing, however, tends to obscure the structural precarity underlying their experience: all of the interviewed women spent years working without a contract, under conditions of economic and systemic insecurity. Their gratitude toward their employers who were personally "kind" to them should not be mistaken for evidence that the work itself was carried out with dignity – benevolence on the part of an individual employer is not a substitute for structured, regulated system of labour rights. In this respect, the experience of Elvira in Bolzano stands in contrast to the other narratives: her account demonstrates that fair, dignified and properly regulated work is achievable, not through the goodwill of individual employers, but through stricter labour inspections and stronger regional welfare protections. This discrepancy shows that precariousness is not an inherent feature of the care sector, but rather a consequence of uneven policy enforcement.

⁴ In the quotes, throughout this article, ellipses without brackets (...) indicate a pause of hesitation in the participant's speech, while bracketed ellipses ([...]) indicate text omitted by the author.

THE DEFINITIVE RETURN: TRIGGERS AND IDENTITY

Return migration, as reflected in this sample, can be better understood through the framework of circular migration (Triandafyllidou, 2013). Although this research focuses on their definitive return, it is crucial to recognize that these women maintained an annual presence in Romania throughout their time abroad. Their experiences mirror those of Ukrainian women described by Sabrina Marchetti (2015), characterized by long-term stays in Italy interspersed with return periods of approximately one month. This stands in contrast to the patterns of Polish migrants, who often alternate shorter periods of labour in Italy with extended periods in their home country (*Ibidem*).

The transition from cyclical return to a definitive return was rarely abrupt but rather a strategic choice linked to the participants' specific stage in the life course (Elder, 1998). Focusing specifically on family-related return motivations – which account for six of the ten cases – the analysis reveals a clear distinction between two primary triggers:

- Children's independence: Once children achieve economic independence, the mothers felt released from the moral and financial obligations that prompted their initial departure.
- The perpetual care chain: some of the women returned from Italy to care for their ageing parents. This highlights a continuous chain of care where these women, after decades of providing care in Italy, return home only to resume caregiving roles for their own kin.

Beyond these familial triggers, the remaining four participants, completing the full sample of ten, concluded their migratory project for reasons not directly tied to kinship obligations – either reaching the natural end of their working career (two cases) or being compelled to return due to their own declining health (two cases). While these trajectories fall outside the scope of the familial analysis developed here, they nonetheless confirm that the transition to a definitive return is shaped by a plurality of converging factors rather than a single dominant cause.

This return pattern is notably linear, challenging models that frame return as a difficult choice between two territories. Because most participants migrated alone, without a spouse or partner, their children and closest family ties remained in Romania throughout the migration period. As a result, they did not develop the relational anchors in Italy needed to sustain a transnational sense of belonging split between two countries. Contrary to the arguments by Taylor (2015), which suggest that migrants often feel at home in neither territory due to family ties spanning both, these women maintained an exclusive and powerful bond with their country of origin where their family remained. This is why their emotional and symbolic anchoring was grounded in Romania, and also why their decision to return was easy to take once their circumstances had changed, as Gabriela noted: she never envisioned a life in Italy because it served a purely functional purpose:

“I never dreamed of a life in Italy, because that wasn’t my purpose”.

Upon return, the daily lives of these women are characterized by a transition into retirement. While the majority are pensioners (7 out of 10), some continue to engage in domestic labour locally for an extra income (3 out of 10). While Vlase (2013) asserts that women engage in various professional activities upon their return, the participants in this study found themselves back into the same labour sectors they had previously left in Italy, both through informal arrangements or formal employment contracts. Only one respondent is currently employed as a healthcare assistant in a Romanian nursing home; whereas the remaining two serve as domestic caregivers for the elderly or local families with children. Despite this, as Vlase (*ibidem*) highlighted, none of the women from my panel contemplated establishing a business within the care sector upon their return. This difference from male returnees’ entrepreneurial tendencies reflects structural barriers rather than differences in ambition: opening a care facility requires substantial capital and state permits, while construction entrepreneurship mainly involves selling one’s own labour. Even lower-threshold options, such as independent home-care services, appear unattractive, likely because the Romanian market cannot sustain comparable income levels.

A crucial finding regarding their reintegration is the role of extended kinship networks. While children remain a primary source of support, many participants highlighted the importance of kin (such as brothers-in-law) in providing them with a social and functional safety net upon their return. This reliance on broader family structures aligns with the findings of Cingolani (2025a), who observed that *siblings*, who often remained marginalized during their relatives’ migration, assume a central supportive role upon their return. This importance sometimes extended beyond siblings, to include sisters-in-law, as evidenced by Iulia’s testimony:

“You know how women are. I don’t really speak about matters of the heart within him [the brother], I speak with my sister-in-law. With my brother, it’s just an exchange of information, so to speak, but with my sister-in-law, it’s about deeper emotional matters.”

Despite this support, returning to one’s family does not always correspond to the initial expectations, as relationships have changed over the years, because of years of absence as noted by Iulia:

“Like the family, cousins, friends... the family is no longer as it once was.”

Furthermore, the spatial proximity and institutional framework of the European Union (Triandafyllidou, 2013) have facilitated a seamless transition, allowing for frequent annual visits that prevented the erosion of identity during their years abroad. Indeed, this is a defining characteristic of this specific migratory flow, which is marked by a single definitive return, but by multiple returns throughout the migratory experience, as in the case of Ukrainians women (Vianello, 2013). Some participants noted that such mobility was initially impossible due to their

precarious legal status; holding only temporary residence permits restricted their ability to travel freely, as they highlighted, during my discussion:

“I did not return back home during 2005–2006 because I am not entirely sure what the process was, but they would place an entry ban or a formal interdiction on your passport.” (Gabriela)

“For three years, I was unable to return because we lacked the necessary legal documents”. (Iulia)

However, following Romania’s accession to the European Union in 2007 (Hunya, 2017), annual returns, typically during the summer, have enabled these women to maintain significant social and territorial ties.

While these annual visits made the final return more fluid, Catrina and Elvira still described moments of real emotional difficulty:

“It was a difficult return, let’s say, because people looked at you with this look, you worked abroad... [...] Let’s say I had to spend a couple of months getting used to life in Romania again, because you’re used to life abroad.” (Catrina)

“Oh, when I came back, I was happy, of course, I really happy... but, like I said, on the street, when you meet people after more than a year like that, you don’t know them... they don’t know you either... it’s a problem. Yes, yes and the kids – when I left [they were young] and then when I came back, they were grown, right? 10–12 years older, and they’d changed so much, I didn’t recognize them, no... yes even at home, you feel a bit... not discomfort, but you don’t recognize your own house. You’ve been away for many years... right? And things like that, they come up a little... they make you feel a bit bad... let’s say, for sure, when you see in your own home that you can’t find what you need.” (Elvira)

This initial disorientation, often described as feeling like a foreigner in your own home, is typically a transient phase. Research shows that these women successfully reconstruct their lives by establishing new daily routines centered on the home and local territory, with the support of their children and siblings. Entering again the domestic sphere allows these women to reclaim their role in the family, which serves as a tool for reintegration. For example, Elvira maintains a strict daily routine of cooking for her son, while Catrina identifies herself as a *housewife* who finds fulfillment in managing the household and cooking for her adult son. Beyond family duties, social and spiritual engagement provides essential psychological stability. Ilona structured her return through rigid schedules for meals, reading and walking with friends, which she describes as a form of *therapy*. Others, like Miluta, sustain community bonds by baking and offering mutual aid to friends. In conclusion, the interviewed women demonstrate how an initial disorientation can be overcome with the creation of a new daily routine and thanks to the support given by the family.

Despite years of labour and sacrifice, these women lack recognition from their local communities and at the national level. In many ways, coming home does not mark the end of their journey, but the beginning of a new phase of adjustment,

bearing a strong resemblance to the challenges they once faced when they first left. Returnees must, once again, negotiate their place within a social and administrative system, this time in their own country of origin, or in their own home – which has itself changed during their years abroad. This systemic invisibility is evidenced by the total absence of social subsidies for returnees, a lack of reintegration incentives, and a lack of dedicated public services tailored to their specific needs. Consequently, this phenomenon exemplifies the concept of *double absence* (Sayad, 2002) or even a *triple absence* (Cingolani, 2009), wherein the individual is not recognized, in their specific role as an economic provider sustaining the family through remittances, by any institutional or social body. Their contribution and sacrifice are not acknowledged in the country of emigration, nor upon their return, even in their country of origin, remaining marginalized within the social context, silent and invisible. Indeed, establishing contact and mapping their returns proved equally challenging, confirming that their presence remains marginalized and obscured within the territory. It is essential to acknowledge their narratives and trajectories, thereby facilitating a more dignified and seamless return by guaranteeing their rights and validating their lived experiences.

ECONOMIC STATUS AND THE PENSION GAP

The economic status of the participants highlights the structural failures of the transnational labour market, which are particularly intrinsic to the sector of care work (Ascione, 2012). Having typically migrated around the age of forty, these women spent a significant part of their working career in Romania (approximately 20 years) before relocating to Italy, where they have worked for over a decade. As a result, they face a severe “pension gap”. The picture that emerges from the interviews is uneven rather than uniform: some participants do receive a pension from the Italian state, proportional to the periods for which they held a formal contract, while others – despite having worked in Italy for a decade or more – receive nothing from Italy and rely solely on their Romanian pension. This disparity is only partly explained by the prevalence of informal or grey labour in the sector; as discussed below, it may also reflect unequal awareness of, or access to, the entitlements that formally documented periods would in principle generate.

In this sector, actual working hours frequently exceed contractual stipulations (Catanzaro, Colombo, 2009), a condition that has prevented many from accruing the minimum contributions necessary to qualify for an Italian pension. This material instability underscores the urgent need for integrated European pension regulations, such as an EU Pension Bank, to prevent the fragmentation of social security profiles for mobile workers whose careers are bifurcated across borders.

One aspect that deserves further clarification concerns the pension situation more broadly, specifically the relationship between periods of informal labour and Italian pension entitlement. Under Regulation (EC) No 883/2004 on the coordination

of social security systems, Italy's National Social Security Institute (INPS – Istituto Nazionale della Previdenza Sociale) maintains a functional relationship with Romania's National House of Public Pensions (Casa Națională de Pensii Publice): contribution periods formally registered in each country are aggregated, and each state pays a pro-rata share of the pension corresponding to the periods actually recorded within its own system. Crucially, however, this mechanism can only operate on periods for which contributions were formally registered and paid; undeclared or “grey” work generates no such recognized period and is therefore excluded from both Italy's own pension requirements and the aggregated EU total. This economic resilience was also sustained through the remittances accumulated over their years of labour abroad – money migrants send back to family in their home country (Taylor, 1999). As interviewee Iulia said:

“I was even able to leave Italy because I already had my little apartment, although I don't remember exactly if I had all the furniture, all the things, but I had enough to live a normal life.”

This sentiment is echoed by Catrina, who successfully used her Italian earnings to renovate her home and purchase an apartment that she now rents out, providing her with a vital source of income in the absence of a full pension.

Despite the economic precarity they face due to fragmented career paths, these women express a steadfast capacity to pursue a quiet daily existence. For the vast majority, the migratory trajectory is concluded. An exception within my sample is Iulia, who expressed the possibility of returning to Italy solely to reach the ten-year threshold she believed to be mandatory to qualify for a pension under Italian law:

“If I'll ever go back, I'll tell them from that start that I want to come home twice a year. I told them that if you ever need me in the future, you can call me [...] But for someone like you (that family), yes, I'll do at least another three or four years, to make it ten years, who knows, when I'm seventy, I'll have a pension, to make up the extra I'll need”.

In summary, the economic status of the interviewed women is characterized by a profound dichotomy. While their work migration successfully achieved its primary objective, i.e., securing financial stability and a better future for their children through remittances and building or repairing a property, it simultaneously exposed the workers to long-term structural vulnerability. Their return to Romania, despite their resilience, highlights the severe consequences of a fragmented transnational career shaped by informal labour in Italy. The failure to meet minimum contribution thresholds precludes them from accessing a full pension, forcing them to navigate later life in a state of economic precarity. This material instability is inextricably linked to their physical and psychological well-being, leading to the examination of the health status of these returnees.

It is also worth clarifying a point that recurred throughout the interviews: eligibility for the Italian old-age pension is often misunderstood, including by the women interviewed themselves. Under the rules currently in force (Patronato

ACLI, 2026), the general path to an old-age pension requires reaching 67 years of age together with at least 20 years of contributions; for workers whose contribution history falls entirely within the fully contributive system (i.e., beginning from 1 January 1996 onward), an alternative path exists at 71 years of age with a minimum of only 5 years of effective contributions, regardless of the resulting pension amount. A distinct provision may also apply specifically to foreign workers who permanently repatriate, though this avenue would benefit from direct verification with a *patronato* (a pension advice office) rather than being treated as settled here. What emerges clearly from the interviews, however, is that the women themselves often hold an inaccurate picture of these requirements, regardless of which threshold is technically correct. Iulia, for instance, explained:

“I’ve heard from some friends that you need to have worked in Italy for at least ten years to be able to apply for a pension.” She noted that she still had three to four years left to reach that ten-year threshold. (Iulia)

This figure corresponds to none of the thresholds outlined above, suggesting that informal, word-of-mouth knowledge circulating within the migrant community may diverge significantly from the actual legal requirements. This reinforces the interpretation offered earlier: the pension gap documented in this study may stem not only from informal labour itself, but also from unequal access to accurate information about pension entitlements – a possibility that, together with the divergence between official contribution records and self-reported interview data, remains an important direction for further research.

HEALTH STATUS, WELL-BEING AND CORPORAL COST: THE ITALY SYNDROME NARRATIVE

The physical and psychological health of these women upon their return represents one of the most significant findings of my research. The nature of this occupation, characterized by hands-on work, high relational density and intense emotional proximity with both care recipients and their family members, contributes to putting the health of working women at risk (Vianello, 2015). Indeed, this constant emotional burden, often coupled with isolation and linguistic barriers, significantly affects the well-being of workers. The accumulation of these stressors inevitably leads to profound physical and mental exhaustion, manifesting in high levels of occupational burnout (Redini, Vianello, 2020).

Within this context, the term *Italy Syndrome* (Marchetti M., 2016) has gained significant traction, emerging as a prevailing label to characterize the occupational stress experienced by these workers throughout their years of employment and upon their return. However, this study approaches such a label with caution. This skepticism stems from the fact that the term lacks formal medical validation and often fosters a stigmatizing narrative, shifting the focus toward moral judgment, where women are viewed negatively for leaving their children behind.

The data further suggest that health outcomes are not a generic consequence of migration but are strictly dependent on structural working conditions. In fact, in work situations where care work was performed within a framework of mutual respect, regulated hours and appropriate boundaries (such as having your own room separate from that of the elderly person), the women returned to Romania in relatively good health, despite their age. Conversely, health deterioration was most evident in those who endured years of live-in arrangements without contracts, lack of privacy and constant 24-hour availability.

Indeed, the story of Elvira confirms that, within frameworks of mutual respect and regulated hours, care workers can return in relatively good health. She worked in Northern Italy, reported being “*never sick*” and described a supportive environment where she had access to medical check-ups and a respectful relationship with the families. Conversely, women in unregulated, 24-hour live-in arrangements suffered the most significant physical and psychological attrition. Rather than attributing such distress to a psychological pathology, one may view it as a social and occupational consequence of precarious labour.

The physical, “corporal cost” is evidenced by chronic injuries resulting from a lack of proper equipment. Iulia explicitly rejects the clinical label of a “syndrome”, attributing her health issues to the structural neglect of her own well-being in favor of the patient:

“I have the spine destroyed [sic] [...] you do it for 2–3 years top”.

She highlights that many caregivers suffer because families refuse to use lifters or hoists to save time, forcing the women to use their own bodies as tools. Irina corroborates this, explaining that she was forced to return home because her “*back, that could not take it anymore*” – a consequence of lacking the necessary mechanical aids to move bedridden patients.

The emotional toll is equally tied to the intensity of the care relationship. Catrina describes the psychological exhaustion of caring for Alzheimer’s patients without adequate pauses, noting that the constant mimicry and high relational density can affect their health. This is not a sudden clinical onset, but gradual erosion caused by “*putting up with everything*” and the stress of being treated like a “*servant*”, as Catrina and Elvira highlighted, during the interviews.

The findings surrounding the health of returnees require a rigorous comparison between individual testimonies and existing literature. While documenting the corporal cost of decades of caregiving is essential, we must recognize these women as resilient agents rather than passive victims of a clinical condition that lacks formal medical verification. My findings reveal a nuanced reality: half of the interviewed women expressed satisfaction and returned in good health, while the remainder experienced hardships that do not necessarily constitute a “syndrome”.

As Vianello (2020) argues, it is more accurate to speak of “occupational exhaustion” rather than a medicalized pathology. This shift gives visibility to the macro and micro-level conditions that produce social suffering. At the macro level,

we must consider the specific history of post-Soviet migration (Balcanu, 2009; Ban, 2012; Vlase, 2006). These women embarked on trajectories of autonomous mobility and were often stigmatized or blamed within their home cultures (Cozzi, 2019; Marchetti M., 2016). At the micro level, domestic work involves asymmetrical relations and immense emotional labour (Redini, Vianello, 2020). While some interviewees felt “lucky”, Boccagni and Ambrosini (2012) remind us that employer kindness is not a substitute for structural well-being rights.

The research confirms that those in co-residence (live-in) arrangements face the highest risk, not due to the living situation itself, but due to the relational density – that is, the intensity of interpersonal proximity generated when caregiver and care recipient become each other’s whole point of reference, as professional and private life collapse into a single, undifferentiated space, and the lack of boundaries within a totalizing care work environment (Redini, Vianello, 2020). This burden is exacerbated when caregivers lack specific training on their patient’s pathology. Ultimately, we should move away from the *Italy Syndrome* label, which stigmatizes these women as having abandoned their children, rather than recognizing their migration as an agentic response to structural economic constraints (Cozzi, 2019). Instead, when such distress presents itself, it should be named using accurate, clinically validated terminology – rather than informal, pseudo-medical labels such as *Italy Syndrome* – and understood as a social and occupational consequence of precarious, unregulated labour. By recognizing their rights and labour protections rather than a psychological pathology, we validate their lived experiences, thus enabling the creation of interventions that adequately respond to their health needs, rather than create a stigma around them.

CONCLUSION

The return of Romanian care workers represents far more than the conclusion of a migratory cycle; as the accounts discussed above illustrate, it is, for many, the strategic culmination of a gendered life project, centred on intergenerational social mobility. This research demonstrates that return migration is not a failure of the migratory experience, but a deliberate realignment of life priorities. While for the majority of participants this realignment was triggered by the achievement of core familial objectives – their children’s independence or the need to care for ageing parents – a further share of the sample returned for reasons not directly tied to kinship obligations, namely the natural end of their working career or the onset of their own health issues. This plurality of triggers confirms that the transition to definitive return is shaped by converging factors rather than a single dominant cause. By integrating evidence stemming from my interviews with the theoretical framework, this study identifies three critical dimensions that define the return of these women into the contemporary Romanian landscape.

The initial phase of homecoming is frequently characterized by a profound sense of disorientation, where returnees navigate the experience of being “foreigners in their own home”. Although this disorientation is usually temporary, the re-establishing process occurs primarily through the reclaim of their traditional domestic roles. All this confirms that return migration is not merely a “homecoming” or the conclusion of a cycle, but something far more significant, akin to a distinct migration in its own right, which reproduces many of the structural dynamics of adaptation, invisibility and institutional neglect that characterized the initial departure (Cassarino, 2004). Returnees are compelled, once more, to renegotiate their place within a social and administrative system, now within a homeland reshaped in their absence. A significant paradox thus emerges – these women manage to reclaim their place within family and kinship networks and at the same time, they remain excluded from the public social sphere. This can be exemplified by using the concept of *triple absence* (Cingolani, 2009), wherein the migrant is unrecognized in the host country, unrecognized in the country of origin, and invisible upon their return. By viewing their tenure abroad as a closed professional chapter, they remain atomized, which inadvertently reinforces their systemic invisibility and precludes the formation of a collective voice to advocate for institutional recognition.

Another important point that has emerged through data collection regards their economic status. This reveals a stark contradiction between the successful completion of the familial migratory project and the enduring vulnerability of the individual worker. Their migration has effectively achieved its primary objective, the social and educational advancement of the next generation, often sustained by extreme personal austerity and the strategic use of remittances.

Conversely, these successes are shadowed by individual financial insecurity. The “pension gap” resulting from decades of informal or *grey* labour in the Italian care sector represents a profound institutional failure. In the absence of adequate state subsidies or integrated transnational social security, these women exhibit remarkable resilience through property ownership. The renovation or purchase of a home in Romania serves as a vital social buffer, providing a sense of stability that the formal labour market failed to guarantee (Boccagni, 2017).

Regarding their health status, this research explicitly contests the pathologizing narrative of *Italy Syndrome*, arguing that the physical and emotional toll of caregiving is a social and occupational consequence of precarious labour rather than an inherent psychological pathology (Redini, Vianello, 2020). The corporal cost of migration is fundamentally linked to unregulated working conditions and the high relational density of co-residence. The findings suggest that health outcomes are strictly dependent on the structural frameworks within which labour is performed. Where work was regulated and boundaries were respected, women returned with a greater physical and psychological integrity, as Elvira demonstrates. Conversely, the totalizing nature of unregulated live-in care often presents its final bill only after repatriation.

While occupational exhaustion was evident, a recurring tendency emerged among the interviewees to minimize their own suffering, often describing themselves as having been “lucky” despite their hardship. However, as Boccagni and Ambrosini (2012) argue, the employer’s behaviour based exclusively on benevolence is insufficient to guarantee long-term well-being. It is imperative to transition from a model of domestic goodwill toward a system of formal legal entitlements. In this regard, regulations must work alongside professional training. Establishing entry-level training programs is essential to provide workers with the tools necessary to recognize occupational risks, manage the complexities of care and respond effectively to the clinical crises of their patients. Parallel to this, dedicated support centres must be established, both in the destination and origin countries, to offer psychological support and spaces for listening. Such services are vital to breaking the isolation and marginality that characterize these women’s lives.

Recognition from the Romanian state and the social system is an indispensable step toward justice. By understanding and addressing the specific needs of these returnees, the state would not only validate their life stories but also facilitate the creation of horizontal networks. Only through collective reflection and the sharing of a sometimes painful past can the migratory experience be transformed into an integrated, positive memory, allowing these women to step out of the shadows.

On the economic front, the primary urgency remains pension security. It is necessary for the Romanian state to actively recognize the value of labour performed abroad; and also, on the other hand, the Italian state must improve the contractual situation of care workers. While EU coordination mechanisms already allow for the aggregation of contribution periods formally registered across member states, this study suggests that the structural vulnerability of these workers stems less from cross-border fragmentation than from the prevalence of undeclared labour itself, which generates no recognized contribution period in the first place. Addressing this gap requires targeted measures: incentives or amnesty schemes for the retroactive regularization of past undeclared work, stronger labour inspections in the domestic care sector to prevent future informality, and dedicated information services – through *patronati* and consular networks – to ensure that migrant workers are aware of their actual entitlements before, rather than after the retirement age. This is not merely a matter of institutional efficiency: as the often fragmented and contradictory accounts collected in this study suggest, many of these women reach old age without a clear understanding of the rights they are entitled to claim, particularly regarding pension eligibility. After decades of demanding, undervalued labour, ensuring that they are properly informed and supported in understanding their entitlements is not a bureaucratic afterthought, but a matter of basic dignity. Only by tackling informality at its source, rather than assuming the problem lies solely in administrative fragmentation, can a dignified pension be guaranteed to these women.

Ultimately, the return, for these women, represents a journey toward achieving a sense of integrity, sustained by the moral satisfaction of having fulfilled a vital mission for their families. However, individual resilience must not serve as an alibi for institutional inertia. Validating these trajectories means recognizing that the care these women provided to Italian families for decades must finally be reciprocated. It is time for their dedication to be met with dignity, systemic justice, and formal recognition that transcends national borders, offering them a place in society even after years of invisibility abroad, recognizing their work upon their return, and thus allowing them to age with dignity.

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