

Labour Exploitation, Gender Violence and Barriers to Reproductive and Sexual Rights: The Experiences of Migrant Women in Italian Agriculture

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Abstract

In recent years, significant research has explored, from both a sociological and legal perspective, the structural nature of labour exploitation and its connections to gender-based violence, with a particular focus on migrant women workers. In line with this perspective, this article examines the interplay between labour exploitation, gender-based violence – including domestic violence – and access to the right to health, particularly sexual and reproductive health. It focuses on the experiences of migrant women employed in the agricultural sector in rural Italy, discussing key theoretical and legal issues related to the concepts of labour exploitation, gender-based violence and reproductive justice. The article sheds light on the pervasive nature of exploitation that extends far beyond the experience of work in the strict sense, deeply permeating many aspects of the living conditions – thus also the health – of women workers, when intertwined with patriarchal practices and oppressions, as well as various situations of intersectional vulnerability.

Keywords: labour exploitation, gender-based violence, sexual and reproductive health, migrant women workers, agriculture.

Sommario

Negli ultimi anni, diverse ricerche hanno analizzato, in una prospettiva sociologica e giuridica, la natura strutturale dello sfruttamento lavorativo e le sue connessioni con le dinamiche di violenza di genere, dedicando un'attenzione particolare alle condizioni delle lavoratrici migranti. In linea con questa prospettiva, il presente articolo esamina il rapporto tra lo sfruttamento lavorativo, la violenza di genere – inclusa la violenza domestica – e l'accesso al diritto alla salute, soprattutto in ambito di salute riproduttiva, focalizzandosi sulle esperienze delle donne migranti impiegate nel settore agricolo in alcune zone del sud Italia. Più precisamente, dopo aver discusso le principali

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questioni teoriche e giuridiche legate ai concetti di sfruttamento lavorativo, violenza di genere e giustizia riproduttiva, l'articolo mette in luce il carattere pervasivo dello sfruttamento che si estende ben oltre l'esperienza lavorativa in senso stretto, permeando profondamente molti aspetti delle condizioni di vita – quindi anche della salute – delle lavoratrici, quando si intreccia con pratiche e oppressioni patriarcali, nonché con le diverse situazioni di vulnerabilità intersezionale.

Parole chiave: sfruttamento lavorativo, violenza di genere, salute sessuale e riproduttiva, lavoratrici migranti, agricoltura.

1. Introduction

Amid growing national and international attention to exploitation dynamics in unprotected sectors such as agriculture, and particularly those affecting migrant workers, a significant body of legal and social scholarship has challenged narrow understandings of labour exploitation, which are primarily framed through a criminal law perspective. This scholarship has emphasised the need to view exploitation as a systemic issue, one that cannot be reduced to mere exceptional cases or confined within the limited conceptual framework of a pathological relationship between parties (see, among others, Marks 2008; Rigo 2016; Kotiswaran 2017; Giammarinaro 2022b; Mantouvalou 2023; Palumbo 2024). These scholars have thus highlighted the social dimension of labour exploitation, stressing the necessity to frame it as a structural component of capitalist systems which has expanded exponentially in the current neoliberal era, a period characterised by market deregulation and increasingly exclusionary and selective legal and policy regimes in the field of migration and social rights.

In this context, there has been an increasing scholarly focus on gender and intersectional perspectives to identify and understand the patterns of exploitation. This has included sectors traditionally considered male-dominated, such as agriculture (see Hellio 2016; Palumbo and Sciarba 2018; Palumbo 2022; Giammarinaro 2022b; Corrado et al. 2023; Loezar-Hernández 2025). Far from adopting a victimising or sensationalist perspective, these studies have – in the words of Camile Schmoll (2020) – “feminised the gaze” on these sectors, highlighting the specific forms of exploitation and abuse that women workers, particularly migrant women, often face. This takes into account the interplay of factors that shape their situational vulnerabilities (Palumbo 2024), as well as their positioning and agency within power dynamics. The adoption of such a gender perspective, particularly the analytical framework of social reproduction (Rigo 2022), has also made it possible to understand the characteristics of dynamics of

exploitation that cannot be fully grasped without considering its pervasive dimension. This tends to permeate many aspects of workers' individual and relational spheres, while also intersecting with gender-based violence and other forms of oppression and discrimination.

Against this background, this article will focus on the relationship between exploitation, gender-based violence – including domestic violence – and access to the right to health, especially in the area of reproductive health, for migrant women employed in agriculture in Italy. The aim is to shed light on how the dynamics and logic of labour exploitation go far beyond mere working conditions, deeply affecting the lives – and thus also the health – of workers, especially women, when intertwined with patriarchal practices and oppressions, as well as with the intersectional vulnerabilities these workers experience.

After discussing key theoretical and legal issues related to the concepts of labour exploitation, gender-based violence and reproductive justice, the article will use this conceptual framework to look at the working and living conditions of migrant women workers employed in the agricultural sector in Italy, particularly in the provinces of Ragusa (Sicily) and Naples and Caserta (Campania).

The analysis is based on data I have been collecting since 2014 in the greenhouse area of Ragusa (Sicily), a zone known as the *Fascia Trasformata* (Transformed Belt)². The fieldwork has involved participant observation at key local sites (including the street unit of the Ragusa anti-trafficking organisation and the Caritas Ragusa legal help desk for migrant farmworkers) and meetings, conversations and interviews with key stakeholders. I have had informal conversations with at least two hundred people (including migrant workers and various actors involved in the fields of migration and labour exploitation). I interviewed one hundred and ten stakeholders – fifty local actors (including social workers, trade union members, lawyers and judges) and sixty migrant workers, mostly Romanian women and men as well as a few Tunisians (female and male), including workers in irregular and regular legal status conditions. By actively engaging in initiatives led by local institutions and organisations to tackle the situational vulnerabilities faced by migrant workers in the area, my work adopts an action-research approach. This approach, in line with a “heuristic-hermeneutic cycle” (Santoro 2021, p. 165), allows for the continuous analysis and interpretation of social reality issues, while simultaneously seeking to address them by strengthening the effectiveness of the rights of marginalised people. In particular, this article focuses on the data I have collected during my participation as an

2 The Transformed Belt refers to the agricultural area in the Province of Ragusa, between the municipalities of Acate, Vittoria, Santa Croce Camerina and Scoglitti, where seasonal crops have been replaced by intensive farming through a greenhouse cultivation system.

expert/consultant in the *Trasformare la Fascia Trasformata* (TFT) project, implemented in Ragusa from 2022 to 2024³ to address the exploitative and degrading working and living conditions faced by migrant farmworkers and the impact on their families, who often live with them in such situations. Among other key actions, the project led to the establishment of a help desk called *Sportello Donna*, which provides socio-healthcare support to women living and working in greenhouses, mainly Romanians, Tunisians, Albanians and Moroccans. This service desk has become a key observatory for identifying and understanding the dynamics of exploitation, violence, and discrimination experienced by these women. It also plays a crucial reproductive justice role by supporting and facilitating these women's access to healthcare services, particularly those related to reproductive and sexual health and rights.

The article also draws on the preliminary findings of ongoing fieldwork, that I started in March 2024 as part of the European Horizon project I-CLAIM⁴, investigating the living and working conditions of women migrant agricultural workers and their families in the provinces of Naples – particularly in Acerra – and of Caserta, especially in the areas of Mondragone and Villa Literno. The fieldwork has been carried out through participant observation at key local sites (including at a trade union office and a church in Villa Literno), meetings, informal conversations and interviews with key stakeholders. I have interviewed thirty participants – four key local actors (including social workers, members of trade unions and lawyers) and twenty six women migrant workers employed in greenhouses and seasonal crops, most of whom are Ukrainian, with a few Polish and Bulgarian. Interviewees include both regular and undocumented migrant workers.

Participants in the study were identified and met through the trusting relationships I developed with various stakeholders during the research. All interviews were generally recorded, transcribed, anonymised (particularly in the case of migrant people) and analysed in conjunction with field notes. Participant information is included in this article only for those interviewees who requested it when their quotes are reported.

3 The project Transforming the Transformed Band (TFT) of Ragusa was funded by the Fondazione con Il Sud and coordinated by Tetti Colorati/Caritas, with the participation of partners CGIL Ragusa, Cooperativa Proxima, L'Altro Diritto ODV and Legambiente.

4 The Horizon project ICLAIM (GA No. 101094373) investigates the living and working conditions of migrant workers and households with precarious legal status in Europe. It is coordinated by Utrecht University and includes among academic partners Italy's Ca' Foscari University. For more information about the project, see: <https://i-claim.eu>.

2. The pervasiveness of labour exploitation

The notion of labour exploitation is not defined by any international legal instruments. At the European level, a definition is provided by the Directive 2009/52/EC – known as the Employer Sanction Directive⁵ – which defines “particularly exploitative working conditions” as:

working conditions, including those resulting from gender based or other discrimination, where there is a striking disproportion compared with the terms of employment of legally employed workers which, for example, affects workers’ health and safety, and which offends against human dignity (Art. 2(i)).

Such a definition, which focuses on the disparity between the working conditions of regularly employed workers and those in irregular situations, refers to several important elements, including the indicator of gender discrimination, the impact on workers’ health and safety, as well as the general clause on incompatibility with human dignity.

At national level, some pieces of legislation, such as Italian legislation, contain a definition of labour exploitation. The definition set out in Article 603-bis of the Italian Penal Code was formulated using an innovative technique within the civil law framework – specifically, the adoption of exploitation indicators related to wages, working hours and rest periods, safety conditions, surveillance methods, and degrading accommodation conditions. These indicators largely reflect the definition of labour exploitation provided in the Employer Sanction Directive, although they completely overlook the gender dimension.

Overall, the definition of labour exploitation in both EU and national legislation remains rooted in a concept of exploitation strictly confined to work experience in a narrow sense and primarily addressed through a repressive approach. However, as several legal and social scholars have underlined (see, for example, Sciarba 2015; Giammarinaro 2022b; Rigo 2022; Mantouvalou 2023; Palumbo 2024), exploitation cannot be understood only within the narrow criminal law conceptual framework of a pathological relationship between exploiters and victims. This limited view does not allow us to address the socially widespread and structural dimension of a reality such as exploitation, which is endemic today in various sectors where the protection of labour rights is weak and the logic of poor work prevails. At the same time, and related to the previous point, such a limited view does not allow for an understanding of the various contextual and structural factors that contribute to situational vulnerabilities in which a person’s choices

5 Directive 2009/52/EC of the European Parliament and of the Council of 18 June 2009 providing for minimum standards on sanctions and measures against employers of illegally staying third-country nationals.

and self-determination, including contractual self-determination, may be restricted, often making labour exploitation the only feasible choice in the face of limited or worse alternatives (Palumbo 2024; Giammarinaro and Palumbo 2021). These factors include restrictive and selective labour migration and asylum regimes, inadequate reception and protection systems, inefficient welfare services, gender and racial inequalities, discriminatory practices and, more generally, public and legal discourses and regulatory mechanisms that create and reinforce power dynamics and systems of oppression (Mantouvalou 2023).

Based on these considerations, there is ongoing debate among legal and social scholars and experts with the aim of developing a notion of exploitation from a social and rights-based approach⁶. By considering exploitation as a continuum ranging from decent work to severe exploitation (Skrivankova 2010), this debate points to the need for a concept of exploitation that goes beyond a criminal law definition – and thus beyond the victim/perpetrator framework – allowing for an understanding of exploitation as rooted in structural inequalities and enabling action on key issues such as social and labour inclusion, the recovery of unpaid wages and compensation for harm (see, for instance, Giammarinaro 2022b; Mantouvalou 2023; Calafà 2021).

Within this view, attention is drawn to the pervasive nature of exploitation. As research on migration from a social and legal perspective has increasingly highlighted, and as the experiences of workers, especially migrants, reveal, exploitation extends beyond their working conditions and permeates multiple aspects of their individual, relational and social dimensions (see, for example, Corrado et al. 2023; Giammarinaro 2022; Caprioglio and Rigo 2020). These dynamics affect not only undocumented migrant workers, but also regular migrant people in precarious situations, including third country nationals with seasonal work permits or temporary protection, asylum seekers and poor EU citizens (Palumbo 2024).

From a gender and intersectional perspective, such an understanding of exploitation requires taking into account the complexities of the experiences of exploited women workers. This is not only to incorporate the gender dimension into the definition of exploitation in criminal law – which remains essential – but also to recognise that exploitation cannot be fully understood in terms of the traditional division between the spheres of production (public) and reproduction (private), a distinction that has been widely challenged by feminist thought. On the contrary, exploitation should be framed

6 For example, various approaches to the notion of exploitation were discussed during a seminar held on March 11, 2024, at the A. Papisca Human Rights Centre of the University of Padua, titled *Towards a Definition of Exploitation for Social Purposes*, with the participation of P. Degani, M.G. Giammarinaro, L. Palumbo, V. Mantouvalou, M. Dottridge, D. Mancini, and C. Rijken.

and conceived as a violation of rights and freedoms that disrupts the very distinction between these two spheres.

Feminist scholars have long contested the distinction between the productive and reproductive domains, stressing how it tends to establish a hierarchy that subordinates the latter (see, for instance, Fortunati 1981). This has had the effect of obscuring the political and productive nature of the activities ascribed to social reproduction, which includes all the activities necessary for the reproduction of human life (such as cooking, cleaning, raising children, caring for family members, and, more broadly, maintaining and managing social and community relations) traditionally performed by women, both as unpaid family care work and as paid work (Picchio 1992). Drawing from different disciplinary perspectives, feminist scholars have highlighted how the naturalisation and devaluation of activities related to social reproduction have been essential to capitalist accumulation processes, for instance by enabling the containment of labour wages, and to the related dynamics of subordination based on gender, class and racial inequalities (see, for instance, Fortunati 1981; Picchio 1992; Federici 2014; Bhattacharya 2017; Fraser 2017).

In line with this perspective, Juanita Elias and Shirin Rai have explored the notion of “everyday life” as a site of social reproduction, where intersectional gendered power imbalances shape spatial and temporal dimensions and intertwine with both structural and relational violence (Elias and Rai 2018). The authors stress the gendered nature of domestic space, which functions as a prototype of what capitalist ideology defines as private space, thus excluding it from the public sphere. Within this space, gender roles are constructed to regulate women’s behaviours in both private and public life. From here arises, for example, the difficulty women face in speaking out during negotiations, at the time of recruitment and afterwards, which negatively impacts the quality of work and the amount of remuneration.

Elias and Rai significantly focus on the issue of travelling to work, as an “everyday life” site of social reproduction. They underline how long commutes are one of the main factors that contributing to reducing, if not eliminating, the time allocated for rest, leisure, and nurturing relationships. This contributes to the compression of life outside work, thus denying the centrality of relationships, affection, and pleasure – everything that lies beyond the Fordist concept of productivity. This lens proposed by these authors seems crucial, for example, for reading the dynamics of agricultural work, which is often poor work, underpaid and characterised by long hours and long distances to the workplace, leaving no room for organising life outside work. For instance, in the case of women migrant farmworkers employed in the province of Caserta, the long commutes to work are often exacerbated by the lack of public transport and the need to rely on informal intermediaries and illegal gangmasters. These dynamics impact individuals’ personal,

family and social lives and represent another area where exploitation plays a pervasive role and challenges the public-private divide.

In highlighting the link between processes of social reproduction and regimes of migration regulation, Enrica Rigo has emphasised how the proliferation and diffusion of “borders” represents a process that “coercively assigns migrants to hierarchical regimes, not only of labour, but of the reproduction of life itself”⁷ (Rigo 2022, p. 81). In this framework, the regimes of life reproduction, especially in the case of migrant workers, become a functional component of a production system based on exploitation, which operates, among other mechanisms, by compressing the conditions and costs related to the reproductive sphere of the labour force. The inadequate buildings or shantytown settlements (“*ghetti*”) of migrant agricultural workers in many areas of southern Italy, as well as the institutional tent camps for seasonal workers – which are designed to minimise costs and provide only the barest living conditions – are emblematic of this reality (Corrado and Caruso 2022). The housing conditions of the many workers employed in the greenhouses of the province of Ragusa also illustrate this system of exploitation. Here, unlike in other agricultural areas such as the provinces of Naples and Caserta, accommodation is provided in the same places or in places adjacent to those where the agricultural workers work. This leads to a systemic organisation of labour relations, since many employers take over the management and control of the housing of the workers and their families. This housing is therefore located in isolated rural areas, without public transport, and is often inadequate or dilapidated, lacking basic services. In this case, it is the long distances to the nearest urban centres, not to the workplace (as observed in the Campania area), that significantly impacts workers’ living conditions and daily lives.

In general, socio-spatial marginalisation becomes a key element, integrating the pervasiveness of the dynamics of exploitation that deeply shape and affect the everyday lives of workers. Marginalisation, as eloquently explained by Iris Marion Young (1990), means that individuals not only lack the material resources necessary for survival and well-being, but are also dependent on others for access to these resources. In a context of invisibility and absence of effective institutional support, this dependency contributes to amplifying situations of vulnerability to exploitation and abuse. These dynamics, as discussed below, are exacerbated in the case of women farmworkers, who often bear the heaviest burden of family and care responsibilities. This results in a double burden of work for women who, in addition to gruelling and harsh working conditions and limited mobility in agricultural areas, are also faced with care and reproductive work within the family and the associated need for immediate income (Palumbo and Sciarba 2018).

7 My translation to English.

3. The links to gender-based violence and its structural nature

While it is important to maintain a clear distinction between the notions of exploitation and violence, a gendered perspective on labour exploitation and its pervasiveness reveals that it often overlaps with forms of violence.

Women often face a continuum of violence (Kelly 1987), including sexual, physical, psychological, economic and institutional violence, which in the case of migrant women unfolds throughout their migration experiences (Krauss 2015). As Barbara Pinelli underlines, the cycle of violence that often affects migrant women is produced by multiple forms of oppression and discrimination which, being closely linked, reinforce one another (Pinelli 2019, p. 191). Violence can be part of migrant women's experiences, from the conditions that force them to leave, to the dangers they face during their journey, to the hardships they encounter in countries of arrival or destination. In particular, in a context characterised by increasingly restrictive migration and asylum laws and policies, such as those of the EU and its Member States, many migrants, driven by the need to escape gender-based violence, death or inhuman and degrading treatment, fall into the hands of criminal networks and embark on dangerous migration routes characterised by abuse, violence and exploitation. These conditions often persist in their countries of destination, especially in the presence of debt (Brambilla and Lici 2022).

In this scenario, the different situations of vulnerability in which migrant women find themselves as a result of the intersection of personal, contextual and structural factors – including legal status and the burden of family and care responsibilities with the associated need to earn – expose them differently to the forms (and risks) of violence and exploitation. This, in turn, shapes the diverse strategies and practices of agency that women enact to confront and resist these dynamics (Freedman 2016; Schmol 2022).

By focusing on the living and working conditions of women migrant workers in destination countries, several studies have highlighted how harsh and exploitative working conditions often intersect with gender-based violence within gender- and nationality-segmented labour markets that tend to confine migrant women to unprotected sectors such as domestic work and agriculture (see, for instance, Sciorba 2015; Palumbo and Sciorba 2018; Giammarinaro 2022b; ActionAid 2022; Slaves No More 2022). Gender-based violence perpetrated by various actors, such as employers, gangmasters or intermediaries, includes harassment, as well as psychological, verbal, physical and sexual abuse and blackmail. These forms of violence are used almost systematically against women workers employed in such sectors, confirming that they are an integral part of the way in which exploitative relationships are established or maintained.

Frequently, this cycle of violence includes forms of domestic violence perpetrated by partners and husbands, who in some cases are also co-workers. As evidence of this trend, a recent study in Italy has shown that several cases of labour exploitation were discovered after the women had sought support from an anti-violence centre in relation to the domestic violence they had suffered (Casa delle donne per non subire violenza 2022).

Far from being reduced to a victim-perpetrator framework, such dynamics reveal the structural nature of gender-based violence which, as feminist theorists such as Catharine Mackinnon have explained (Mackinnon 1989), is rooted in systemic gender discrimination and subordination. This in turn intersects structurally and dynamically with other axes of oppression, including nationality, “race”, class and legal status (Crenshaw 1989). This is evident in the case of migrant women working as domestic or agricultural workers, who risk losing both their jobs and employer-provided housing if they report abuse. Similarly, migrant women trapped in abusive relationships may face additional barriers if their economic stability or legal residency status is tied to those of their partner or other family member (Rigo 2022).

As the transnational feminist movements of the last decade, such as *Ni Una Menos*, have made clear, gender-based violence in all its manifestations cannot be fully understood and addressed without taking into account its systemic dimension (Montella et al. 2019). It is embedded in patriarchal power relations that permeate all spheres of society (from the family to educational institutions to labour relations, etc.) and are intertwined with other social inequalities and forms of discrimination that are also upheld and guaranteed by legal and political regimes.

At the legal level, the Council of Europe’s Convention on preventing and combating violence against women and domestic violence (“the Istanbul Convention”), adopted in 2011 and entering into force in 2014, marked a key moment in translating feminist demands and analyses into legal language, in particular by recognising violence against women as a form of structural violence (De Vido 2016); an approach subsequently followed by important national and European case law (Rigo 2025). In particular, in its Preamble, the Convention significantly affirms that violence against women is a “manifestation of historically unequal power relations between women and men”, which have led to domination and discrimination against women, and acknowledges its “structural nature [...] as gender-based violence”, that is violence against women as women, which disproportionately affects them. In this sense, the Preamble recognises that violence against women “is one of the crucial social mechanisms by which women are forced into a subordinate position compared with men”.

Through this structural approach, which takes into account the historical and social reasons for the subordination of women, the Convention

provides a broad definition of gender-based violence that encompasses its multiple forms. Article 3, in particular, defines violence against women as:

a violation of human rights and a form of discrimination against women and shall mean all acts of gender-based violence that result in, or are likely to result in, physical, sexual, psychological or economic harm or suffering to women, including threats of such acts, coercion or arbitrary deprivation of liberty, whether occurring in public or in private life.

The Convention also contains a definition of domestic violence and, although it does not explicitly affirm it in this definition, it recognises, through the Preamble, the structural dimension of this form of violence, which takes place in affective and family relationships. Such violence, as the Convention states, includes all acts of physical, sexual, psychological, or economic violence that occur in intimate relationships or within the family or household (Art. 3).

Significant is the attention given to the economic manifestation of domestic violence, as this form of violence, as discussed below, is particularly present in the accounts of migrant women workers who live and work in the agricultural sector in conditions of exploitation. Although it does not provide a definition of economic violence, the Istanbul Convention is one of the few international instruments – alongside the 2003 Maputo Protocol on the Rights of African Women – that explicitly reference this form of violence. By doing so, it includes within the broader category of gender-based violence all those abusive behaviours that are often considered “normal” and merely part of household financial management. In this sense, the Convention has helped to shed light on a “tolerated residue” of gender-based violence – to use Duncan Kennedy’s term (2023) – which primarily operates within the financial and material sphere.

In line with this approach, even the recently adopted Directive 2024/1385/EU on combating violence against women and domestic violence⁸ underlines the structural nature of gender-based violence and provides a broad definition that also includes economic violence as one of its forms, although it does not offer an explicit definition of this concept.

As social and legal scholarship has highlighted, the defining feature of economic violence, which often intersects with the pervasive nature of labour exploitation, is the compression of key economic domains essential to individual autonomy, carried out through the denial or restriction of financial and material resources and related fundamental rights, such as the rights to work, education and property (Palumbo 2025). In this sense, Irene Pellizzone (2023) identifies economic violence as a form of atrophy

8 Directive (EU) 2024/1385 of the European Parliament and of the Council of 14 May 2024 on combating violence against women and domestic violence.

of all the economic spheres from which a woman can derive her autonomy, leading to limitations in the enjoyment of money or other goods, that are harmful to her dignity. The scope of economic violence goes beyond the so-called “production” sphere and, as will be discussed later, also includes those behaviours through which partners (and other family members) benefit from women’s care and reproductive work in the family, by using forms of control, abuse and exploitation.

4. Health and reproductive injustices

Once labour exploitation is viewed in its pervasive dimension, affecting multiple aspects of workers’ lives, particularly in the case of migrant workers, and often intersecting with dynamics of gender-based violence, the issue of access to the fundamental right to health, including reproductive health, becomes crucial.

A growing body of sociological and legal research has drawn attention to the health-related issues faced by migrant workers, particularly those employed in unprotected sectors such as agriculture, as a result of harsh and substandard working and living conditions (for example, Holmes 2020; Mozo et al. 2022; Berti and Mascagni 2024). Chronic exposure to pesticides and heat, repetitive heavy lifting, long working hours and the use of hazardous machinery are among the primary factors contributing to physical and psychological health issues among farmworkers. These conditions also put workers at risk of fatal accidents. In Italy, for example, agriculture is one of the sectors with the highest rates of work-related fatalities (Osservatorio Placido Rizzotto 2024).

Harsh working rhythms for inadequate pay, reflecting the realities of poor work, combined with inadequate and isolated living conditions that require long commutes to work or social spaces, also have significant impact on workers’ well-being and mental health. Excessive consumption of medication, particularly analgesics and non-steroidal anti-inflammatory drugs (NSAIDs), or alcohol is a common way to cope with demanding work and life rhythms. This trend recalls the “centrality of work and the necessity to earn without missing days, at the expense of personal health and well-being protection, beyond the basic rights”⁹ (Berti and Mascagni 2024, p. 50).

As anthropologist Seth Holme has argued in relation to migrant farmworkers in the US, an observation equally applicable in Europe, particularly Italy:

9 My translation to English.

because of the contemporary racialized, classed, and illegalized definitions of the categories of ‘migrant’ and ‘farmworker,’ the chronic wearing out due to these labour conditions is deemed normal for, even essential to those persons positioned in these social categories (Holmes 2020, p. 242).

In practice, the normalisation of exploitative working and living conditions faced by migrant workers – especially in sectors like agriculture – becomes seen as “acceptable” precisely because they are experienced by migrant farmworkers. This, in turn, renders the health suffering and risks workers face invisible, treating them as ordinary aspects and costs of their labour. Within this framework, it is not surprising that health-related issues only come to the fore when a serious incident occurs, starkly challenging the political and institutional structures surrounding the right to health and safety at work (Berti and Mascagni 2024). The response then mainly triggers institutional legal and policy initiatives driven by emergency measures and sensationalist rhetoric, rather than addressing the root causes.

The adoption of a gender and intersectional lens reveals how health issues affecting women, particularly in male-dominated sectors or those traditionally considered male, are further rendered invisible and left unprotected (Mozo et al. 2022). In addition to working rhythms and conditions that often do not take into account the specific needs of women workers – such as those related to the menstrual cycle or chronic gynaecological conditions – there is also the fact that female workers are often more involved in undeclared work, with significant implications for the protection of their rights, particularly in relation to reproductive health. Indeed, in labour market contexts characterised by gendered and racialised dynamics, women workers, especially migrants, are more likely to be engaged in temporary, precarious and informal employment relationships (see, for instance, Giammarinaro 2022b; Slaves No More 2022). This exposes them to reduced social security benefits, including, for instance, maternity benefits (see, among others, Moschetti and Valentino 2019).

As discussed below, the issue of reproductive and sexual health emerges as essential, particularly when strenuous working conditions with minimal protection, coupled with the burden of family care responsibilities and the frequent lack of adequate local services, severely affect women’s health, while simultaneously preventing them from taking adequate care of it. These challenges are exacerbated in situations of gender-based violence.

As outlined in the definition provided by the final document of the International Conference on Population and Development (ICPD) held in Cairo in 1994 (the Cairo Programme of Action) and subsequently adopted by the UN Beijing Platform for Action at the Fourth World Conference on Women in 1995, reproductive health refers to:

A state of complete physical, mental and social well-being and not merely the absence of disease or infirmity, in all matters relating to the reproductive system and to its functions and processes. Reproductive health therefore implies that people are able to have a satisfying and safe sex life and that they have the capability to reproduce and the freedom to decide if, when and how often to do so. Implicit in this is [...] the right of access to health-care services that will enable women to go safely through pregnancy and childbirth. Reproductive health care also includes sexual health, the purpose of which is the enhancement of life and personal relations (the Cairo Programme of Action, para 7.2).

Both of these documents explicitly state that sexual and reproductive rights are an integral aspect of human rights. The comprehensive definition they provide links reproductive and sexual health to a wide range of rights and intersecting issues, including the right to abortion, gender-based violence, maternal mortality, perinatal health and sexually transmitted infections.

Since the mid-1990s, sexual and reproductive health and rights have gained increasing recognition in the international arena, although the development and the definition of their scope and content remain the subject of controversy and restrictive attacks at international and national levels¹⁰. Two important milestones in shaping the international regulatory framework in this area have been the adoption of General Comment No. 22 on the right to sexual and reproductive health by the UN Committee on Economic, Social, and Cultural Rights in 2016, and General Comment No. 36 on the right to life by the UN Human Rights Committee in 2018. By aiming to address serious violations in practice and adopting a clear human rights-based approach to sexuality and reproduction, these two key documents have contributed to clarifying states' legal obligations to uphold the right to sexual and reproductive health and ensure universal access to related healthcare services, including emergency contraception and safe abortion.

However, inequalities in access to reproductive and sexual rights remain deeply entrenched. As outlined in the 2021 European Parliament resolution on the situation of sexual and reproductive health and rights in the EU (2020/2215(INI)), significant challenges persist. These include limited access, affordability issues, and disparities in the realisation of reproductive and sexual health and rights. Marginalised persons and groups, including migrant people, "often face additional barriers, intersecting discrimination and violence in accessing healthcare" (para. AB). This is confirmed in the case of Italy where, in a context characterised by different regionally-based

¹⁰ For an accurate reconstruction of the evolution of sexual and reproductive health and rights in international human rights law, see Berro Pizzarossa 2018. See also De Vido 2022.

health structures and services, migrant people deal with numerous legal and social challenges in accessing the healthcare system, especially with regard to mental health, reproductive rights and maternal and child health and infectious diseases such as HIV/AIDS (Simm 2023; Aria 2023).

As the important contribution of feminist theories of reproductive justice has highlighted, the complexity of reproductive and sexual health and rights issues, and the challenges in safeguarding them, cannot be fully understood without considering the multiple layers of oppression and intersectional vulnerabilities experienced particularly by migrant women and other marginalised groups (Ross and Solinger 2017). Problematizing the notion of choice, the feminist reproductive justice framework was developed in the mid-1990s by African American women to shed light on the intersectional forms of oppression that threaten Black women's bodily integrity and health. This critical framework "spliced together the concept of reproductive rights and social justice to coin the neologism 'reproductive justice'" (Ross 2018, p. 290), approaching reproductive health in a more holistic way and addressing the interplay of economic, social and legal obstacles to women exercising their right to choose.

Since then, scholars, activists and policymakers have defined reproductive justice around the principles of the right *not* to have a child, the right to *have* a child, and the right to *parent* children in safe and healthy environments (Ross and Solinger 2017, p. 9). Such an approach connects reproductive issues to the struggles for social justice and human rights, recognising the fundamental right to make personal decisions about one's life, and "the obligation of government and society to ensure that the conditions are suitable for implementing one's decisions" (Ross 2017, p. 9). Attention is therefore on the rights to self-determination and sexual and reproductive autonomy, as well as the social and material conditions that either support or obstruct their realisation. In this sense, it might be argued, using the words of Stefano Rodotà, that the emphasis is on:

the context in which reproductive choices are made, in order to ensure that they can take place in conditions of equality, adequate information and the assumption of responsibilities that are not only individual but also social¹¹ (Rodotà 2012, p. 290).

The reproductive justice approach links sexual and reproductive issues to a range of interconnected contextual dynamics, structural barriers and discriminatory practices – such as those related to gender, nationality, legal status and sexual orientation – that shape individual choices and opportunities, further marginalising already marginalised women by limiting their

11 My translation to English.

reproductive choices (Ochoa O’Leary and Simmons 2017). The use of this lens, as adopted in the following pages in relation to migrant women who work and live in agricultural areas, allows women’s health, including sexual and reproductive health, to be considered within a broader framework of factors that affect their well-being and autonomy, while at the same time obscuring and trivialising their needs and the support they require.

Far from denying or overlooking the agency of marginalised women or other marginalised subjectivities, the reproductive justice framework pays attention to the ways in which they act, or attempt to act, in facing and navigating power relations and social structures. As both a theoretical and practical framework (Ross 2018), the reproductive justice framework also serves to recognise and support the crucial role that initiatives by activists, grassroots associations and third sector organisations, such as the one illustrated below in relation to the *Sportello Donna* di Ragusa, can play in facilitating and ensuring access to sexual and reproductive health rights, while contributing to addressing systemic barriers.

5. The experiences of migrant women workers in agriculture

5.1 The intersection between exploitation and gender violence, including domestic violence

After presenting the key theoretical frameworks underpinning this article, this section will focus on the experiences of migrant women workers in Italian agriculture as emblematic of the pervasiveness of labour exploitation when it intersects with gender-based violence, and the impact of exploitative working and living conditions on sexual and reproductive health and rights.

As underlined in the introduction, recent years have seen an increasing scholarly focus on the working and living conditions of migrant women employed in the agricultural sector in Italy (see for example, Palumbo and Sciarba 2018; Giammarinaro 2022a; Corrado et al. 2023; Slaves No More 2022). These studies have highlighted forms of discriminatory and exploitative labour practices from a gender and intersectional perspective. Gendered roles and tasks, gendered wage differentials, the prevalence of informal work and the lack of benefits and protection are some of the recurring dynamics that characterise the employment patterns and labour relations involving women, particularly migrant women, including both undocumented and regular status workers, in the agricultural sector.

As the testimonies collected during my fieldwork clearly reveal, family responsibilities and caring commitments play a crucial role in significantly shaping the pervasive nature of labour exploitation, which extends beyond

the employment relationship in the strict sense and affects many aspects of individual and relational life. Particularly in agricultural areas, many migrant women face physical and social isolation. In this respect, the family and caring responsibilities that fall primarily on them create constant stress and anxiety as they try to reconcile strenuous work conditions with family life and related financial needs.

This is evident in the Transformed Belt of Ragusa, where many migrant workers, especially Romanians and Tunisians, often with their families, live in dilapidated buildings, sometimes owned by their employers and located among the greenhouses, in conditions of total invisibility and isolation, without public transport. Here, not only the gruelling work hours (with early wake-ups and late returns home) but also the long commutes to the nearest urban centres where schools are located make managing care responsibilities complicated and exhausting. This is further exacerbated by lack of local welfare services, including for children and adolescents (such as nurseries, school buses and after-school activities). Women workers try to cope with these challenges in a variety of ways. Some rely on older women in the household – such as mothers, mothers-in-law or aunts – to help with childcare. In other cases, older siblings, especially sisters, are pulled out of school to stay home and care for younger children while their parents work in the fields. Others pay other migrant women to look after their children. Some take their children to work, while others, out of desperation, leave them at home alone, locking the door until the end of the day, hoping to find them safe when they return from work (Palumbo 2022).

Similar dynamics can be observed in the agricultural areas of Naples and Caserta. Here, unlike in the province of Ragusa, most workers live in urban centres. The difficulties of reconciling care responsibilities and family needs with work rhythms are therefore exacerbated by the long commutes required to reach the fields – often meaning, for example, that workers have to leave home at dawn. In the absence of efficient local welfare services, most workers informally pay local women to take their children to and from school and to look after them until their return from work. This increases the stress associated with the need to earn, even just to cope with childcare responsibilities.

The harsh and exhausting working conditions experienced by many women workers, particularly migrant women, are often also accompanied by forms of gender-based violence. Verbal abuse, sexual harassment and blackmail, perpetrated by abusive employers, intermediaries or other local actors, are part of the daily reality for many women agricultural workers in different areas of the country (Palumbo and Sciarba 2018; Giammarinaro 2022a; Action Aid 2022). As a migrant woman employed in the agricultural area of Caserta told me:

It often happens that the employer makes this kind of request. It happened to me several times, but I never accepted. It makes you feel angry and humiliated. Once an employer fired me and a friend during our lunch break because we refused his request. He told us to leave, that we weren't good workers, and didn't even take us home. We had to walk back, a long walk¹².

In the pervasive dimension of the dynamics of exploitation, threats often involve the children of women workers, who sometimes become an additional tool of blackmail by employers, intermediaries, or other local actors on whom the women depend for the necessities of social reproduction, including housing, transport, and access to the education system. This was the case for a Romanian woman employed in the area of Ragusa, whom I have also discussed in another study (Palumbo and Sciarba 2018), who lived with her children in accommodation provided by the employer and located among the greenhouses. In the absence of transport, the woman had asked the employer to take her children to school. In return, however, she had to comply with his sexual demands.

In a context of total isolation and dependence on employers and intermediaries, many women agree to submit to sexual requests out of fear of losing a job that is crucial for supporting their children and ensuring housing and education for them. As the testimonies collected during the fieldwork have revealed, although women's agency is never entirely eliminated by exploitation, in extreme situations their options are severely limited, sometimes leading them to accept exploitation as the lesser evil and coping with it. As Alessandra Sciarba (2015) points out, recalling Eva Feder Kittay's reflections, these women are faced with an "impossible choice" between incomparable needs: survival (for themselves and their families) or dignified work. These are choices that no one should have to make in a democratic society supposedly guaranteeing social human dignity (Palumbo 2024).

In such contexts, women often only manage to escape exploitation when they find a real, viable alternative to non-exploitative work. In other cases, the decision to leave an exploitative situation arises when their high threshold of endurance is exceeded, and their autonomy is significantly reduced, or when the health and well-being of their children are at risk, as happened in the case of the woman with her children illustrated above.

In this scenario, the cycle of violence experienced by women workers often includes domestic violence by partners and husbands, who may also be co-workers. Domestic violence takes many forms, including physical, psychological and economic violence. The latter, for example, is a recurring theme in several of the narratives collected, particularly in the area of Ragusa.

12 Agricultural area of Caserta, March 2025.

Rarely occurring in isolation, economic violence is often part of a wider cycle of violence – physical, psychological and/or sexual – within the affective and familial relationship and is mainly perpetrated by partners or husbands who control their wives’ or partners’ access to financial resources. From accounts collected on the plight of women migrant farmworkers, it emerges that this control can occur through preventing a woman from accessing information about her family’s income and resources, preventing her from having independent access to joint bank accounts or monitoring her spending through control of the bank account. In these cases, partners or husbands often also control their partners’ or wives’ documents.

There are also cases where migrant women work on a farm run by their partner or husband, or in some cases even by themselves, without receiving a salary or access to financial resources. Here, the appeal to the idea of contributing to the household, combined with the assumption of the gratuitousness of labour performed in the “family” context (Quadri 2013; Calafà 2018), becomes a justification for denying forms of remuneration. This fosters situations of economic exploitation within a family business. In other words, the dimension of gratuitousness associated with work carried out in the family environment, considered as an expression of family solidarity but in reality assimilated to concrete forms of labour activity, becomes the terrain into which the logic of economic violence infiltrates.

Such logic also clearly applies to (unpaid) care and reproductive work within the family. As Sundari Anitha (2019) has pointed out, the economic dimension of violence does not only concern the sphere of “production”, but also all those behaviours through which partners exploit the family care and reproductive work carried out by women, using forms of control and abuse. Indeed, it is not uncommon for women who have given up agricultural work to focus on care work in the family to find themselves without direct access to household economic resources which are completely controlled by their partners. For example, one of the social workers in Ragusa told me about a former agricultural worker who, faced with the challenges of reconciling family and working life, exacerbated by the lack of welfare support, decided to dedicate herself entirely to caring for her children. However, her husband prevents her from having independent access to the family’s economic resources, so she has to ask his permission to get money, even to buy basic necessities such as telephone credit. As a result, “she is unable to do anything. Without economic resources, she is completely deprived of her independence”¹³.

As this case clearly shows, economic violence intersects with, and is at the same time produced and fuelled by, gender discrimination and inequalities that shape women’s experiences in accessing the labour market. In a context

13 Ragusa, 27 May 2024.

where women remain the primary caregivers and bear the main responsibility for reproductive work in the family, and where welfare services are inadequate, they are often “forced” to leave their jobs, sometimes in exploitative conditions, to care for their children. This creates a dimension of material and economic dependence on their partners/husbands, sometimes triggering and/or amplifying dynamics of control and violence which deeply undermine their decision-making power and autonomy.

These dynamics are exacerbated by the fact that many women migrant workers living in agricultural areas, such as the Transformed Belt, lack both a driving licence and personal means of transportation. This limited mobility, combined with the absence of effective public transportation, severely restricts their ability to manage both their social and work lives independently, and ultimately affects their access to economic resources. For this reason, one of the important initiatives of the TFT project in Ragusa has been to help migrant women farmworkers to obtain driving licenses, thus contributing to breaking the cycle of dependence, including economic dependence, on their husbands or partners and supporting their agency and social inclusion.

5.2 Health and access to reproductive and sexual health rights

In a context marked by pervasive exploitation and gender-based violence, which infiltrate various aspects of daily life and deeply affect people’s bodies, access to the fundamental right to health, including reproductive health, is a critical challenge.

As one of the Ukrainian women workers in the greenhouses of Villa Literno (Caserta) told me, “working in the fields has changed my body; I could say it has destroyed it”¹⁴. Gruelling work hours, often without breaks and in extreme temperatures, define the daily routines in agriculture, severely compromising the physical and mental health of workers: “When you come home after many hours of work”, another female farmworker said, “your body is burning. You just have to lie down, you can’t do anything else”¹⁵.

Cases of farmworkers developing severe allergies are not uncommon, likely due to prolonged exposure to pesticides and other agricultural chemicals. Some have developed cystitis because they often spend many hours without access to restrooms while working, either because no facilities are available or because the (portable) toilets on the premises are inadequate. Lack of adequate workplace restrooms is certainly problematic for women workers

14 Villa Literno, 3 September 2024.

15 Villa Literno, 3 September 2024.

during their menstrual cycle, even though adaptation strategies are developed. As one worker stressed:

going to work when you have your period is not easy. I used to struggle a lot, not just because of the physical discomfort but also because of the state of the toilets. Now I've got used to it. I often prefer to go somewhere far out in the countryside instead of using the portable toilets. After all, the countryside is already dirty...¹⁶.

Many women farmworkers suffer from back pain and other rheumatic conditions due to the constant physical strain and the repetitive postures required for weeding and picking fruits and vegetables. However, most workers learn to adapt to the pain, accepting it as part of their daily routine and often relying heavily on NSAIDs, the long-term use of which is clearly detrimental to health. As Mozo et al. have pointed out,

given the material conditions of their lives and the necessity to prioritise income, this [is] more a surrender to circumstances than any consent [...] to the naturalisation and minimisation of their health problems (Mozo et al. 2022, p. 708).

Emblematic of this is the case of a migrant worker, a mother of five, who works in the greenhouses of Ragusa and is now unable to walk, partly due to the grueling hours. As a social worker working in the area explained, this situation has been exacerbated by the fact that this woman has not had access to medical and health care for a long time.

For migrant women workers, particularly those in irregular situations or living in isolated areas without public transport, access to the healthcare system is far from straightforward. Isolation, the language barrier, and the lack of cultural mediators in most healthcare facilities are among the main “everyday borders” (Yuval-Davis et al. 2017) and obstacles that shape the lives of these workers, hindering their social inclusion and access to services.

In some agricultural areas, such as Ragusa, third-sector interventions, like the mobile units established by NGOs such as Emergency, aim to fill the gaps in local healthcare services by assisting workers in accessing care. However, in most rural areas, due to the absence of an effective system of low-threshold interventions and services, workers only turn to the public healthcare system in emergency situations. Those who can afford it seek care in the private healthcare system, incurring high costs.

One of the most evident issues in some rural areas of the country, particularly in the province of Ragusa, concerns a difficulty in accessing reproductive and sexual health services. Often migrant women lack informa-

16 Villa Literno, 4 September 2024

tion about their rights, the services they could access, and the institutional support they could turn to. The work carried out by the *Sportello Donna*, established in 2022 in the Ragusa greenhouse area as part of the TFT project, has proven to be of considerable importance. The *Sportello Donna* was conceived as a safe space where women could report the challenges related to their living and working conditions in the greenhouses, including problems accessing local social and health services, and receive support. Since its implementation, the *Sportello* has primarily received requests for information and assistance in accessing reproductive and sexual health services and has quickly become a key point of reference for many migrant women, providing information and support on how to navigate healthcare services. At the same time, it has also become an important observatory for identifying and understanding the dynamics of exploitation and gender-based violence, their intersections and their impact on the health of women workers.

The *Sportello* has supported around hundred migrant women from various nationalities, including Romanians, Tunisians, Albanians and Moroccans, aged between 20 and 45. Their requests have primarily focused on access to screenings related to sexual and reproductive health, such as Pap smears and mammograms, contraceptive methods to prevent unwanted pregnancies (in particular intrauterine devices), and voluntary pregnancy termination. The work of the *Sportello* has shown that access to preventive screenings, as well as to contraception, is significantly limited among migrant women living and working in the agricultural area of Ragusa. As reported by one of the social workers running the organisation:

the lack of access is due not only to these women's limited knowledge of their rights and available services but also, and above all, to the absence and inefficiency of the structural services and infrastructure capable of meeting their needs. A system that acts as a facilitator of prevention through adequate services is necessary¹⁷.

There are few *consultori familiari*, family counselling centres set up by the national health system to provide primary sexual and reproductive health-related information and support, in the main urban areas near the greenhouses of the Transformed Belt and they often have limited opening hours. Some are open to the public for only a few hours a week, and most are only accessible in the mornings when the workers are in the fields. Thus in order to go there women workers must ask for permission from their employers. This often acts as a deterrent for those who do not want to lose a day's of work, especially due to the fear of potential repercussions. In addition, as in many other family counselling centres in agricultural areas across the country, the lack of cultural mediators significantly hampers the ability

17 Ragusa, 6 September 2024.

to fully understand the complexity of situations and the diverse needs of women workers. This is compounded by long waiting times for appointments due to high demand and inadequate staffing and organisational capacity. These delays often prevent women from receiving timely care, even when facing serious health problems.

The experiences gathered through the activities of the *Sportello* reveal that many women have faced multiple pregnancies, often within relationships characterised by dynamics of domination and violence from their partners. In this context, long waiting times for appointments, such as for the insertion of intrauterine devices, are a major problem. Many women experience unwanted pregnancies, sometimes occurring in rapid succession, because they have been unable to access contraception due to these delays and other barriers, or to resist pressure and sexual demands from their partners.

It is also worth noting that many migrant women are unaware that they can request the morning-after pill to prevent pregnancy or contraceptive pills in general. Some travel back to their country of origin to obtain contraceptives, sometimes in unsafe conditions. For example, one of the operators of the *Sportello* reported the case of a woman who, after obtaining a contraceptive pill in her home country, felt unwell and fainted while working in the greenhouses of Ragusa due to an excessive dose of hormones.

Several women have approached the *Sportello* for support with voluntary pregnancy termination, as they were unaware of the services and conditions outlined by national regulation¹⁸. As one of the *Sportello* social workers noted:

Many women workers came to us asking for help to terminate their pregnancy, sometimes after the 90-day period required by law in cases of health, economic, social, or family-related reasons. Some of these women had become pregnant despite already having very young children, some as young as three months¹⁹.

The high number of “conscientious objectors” in many hospitals in the province of Ragusa, those doctors who according to Italian law are permitted to refuse to perform voluntary abortions for personal or religious reasons, is undoubtedly a significant obstacle. It is not uncommon for migrant women to resort to clandestine methods of abortion, sometimes putting their health at great risk (see also Corrado et al. 2023).

18 Italian Law No. 194 of 22 May 1978 on “the social protection of motherhood and the voluntary termination of pregnancy” allows the voluntary termination of a pregnancy within the first 90 days of conception for “health, economic, social or family reasons”. After the three-month period, abortion is only allowed if it is considered that the pregnancy or childbirth would pose a “serious danger to the woman’s life” or if there are diagnosed problems with the foetus, such as genetic abnormalities or malformations thus posing serious danger to the physical or mental health of the woman.

19 Ragusa, 24 May 2024.

The condition of spatial isolation and marginalisation in which migrant women working and living in the area of the Transformed Belt of Ragusa find themselves is another crucial barrier. Without public transport or their own means of transport, many migrant women have to rely on others to get them to medical appointments and thus to exercise their right to health. This often means relying on individuals who exploit the situation by charging for transport services, or on their partners or husbands. As a result, some women have missed appointments because their partner refused to accompany them or was unable to accompany them. This is what happened to one woman supported by the *Sportello* who missed her first appointment for an intrauterine device because her husband was unable to accompany her, delaying the entire procedure. In a context of sexual pressure from her husband, this meant that she had to deal with her fifth pregnancy just a few months after the preceding one.

In addition, many migrant workers in the Transformed Belt live in inadequate housing on unmarked streets, making it impossible for them to receive mail. Thus they do not receive reminders for regular check-ups or notifications of medical test results. Their only option is to visit health facilities in person to receive them. This creates significant barriers to accessing essential health information and increases their dependence on those with transportation, their partners, to accompany them.

Overall, this dimension of isolation creates a dependency that not only subordinates women's needs to the availability and demands of their partners, severely limiting their ability to enjoy their right to health, but also denies them the opportunity to access local services independently, without the presence or mediation of a male partner. Such dynamics reinforce a spiral of subordination and abuse, making it more difficult for women to speak out about domestic violence and seek help.

6. Concluding remarks

Far from being confined to the workplace, the labour exploitation experienced by many migrant women in the agricultural sector permeates multiple aspects of their lives. It deeply shapes their daily experiences and social and interpersonal dynamics, clearly highlighting the limits of the traditional division (hierarchy) between productive and reproductive spheres. As this article has stressed, agricultural work, especially for migrant workers, is poor work, underpaid and characterised by long hours, harsh commutes and inadequate housing conditions, reducing life outside of work to a mere appendage. This has a profound impact on women workers who, often bearing the primary responsibility for family care, constantly struggle to balance

exhausting work schedules with care commitments and the need to earn a living.

Forms of gender-based violence, including economic violence, that intersect or overlap with labour exploitation illustrate the pervasive nature of this exploitation. The testimonies collected reveal a cycle of violence that affects both the workplace and family dynamics, including in the form of economic violence. Within this system of relationships, women workers often face persistent demands from partners or husbands for frequent sexual relations, with the consequent risk of unwanted pregnancies. For example, as discussed in this article, one of the most frequently expressed needs of these workers is access to contraception. This is significantly hampered by various forms of social and spatial marginalisation through the isolation of workplaces, lack of transport, the length of procedures in health services and the absence of cultural mediators in health facilities. All of this complicates women's daily lives and prevents them from exercising their sexual and reproductive rights.

This article has highlighted the fundamental role of the third sector, both in helping to understand the complex dynamics of exploitation and gender-based violence, and in supporting migrant women in agriculture to access their rights, including sexual and reproductive rights, in line with a reproductive justice perspective. However, the pervasive and structural nature of exploitation and gender-based violence also calls for effective policy and institutional interventions that go beyond the still dominant emergency and repressive responses and adopt a structural and gender-based approach – one that considers these issues, to paraphrase Sara De Vido, as “a public health issue, a disease that affects all societies”²⁰ (De Vido 2023, p. 267).

In the light of all this, it is more urgent than ever to develop and implement, using the words of Stefano Rodotà, “policies of rights” (Rodotà 2012, p. 209) that guarantee the conditions for every person to lead a dignified life, making their own choices in conditions of freedom and responsibility, rather than being “forced” to accept abusive or exploitative conditions as a lesser evil. Only concrete and coordinated institutional efforts in this direction, acting at both the legal and social levels, can help to address the pervasive dimensions of exploitation and gender-based violence and their effects.

20 My translation to English.

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